Australians at War Film Archive

Keith Johnston - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:40 **So we'll just start as far back as you can remember if you like, but I understand you were born in New Zealand and you came to Australia as a toddler?**

Yes my father was a New Zealand Expeditionary Force member. He went and fought in Gallipoli with the New Zealand forces and

01:00 during the trip over to Egypt he stopped off in Australia and I'm sure he was that impressed with the place, that I'm sure he wanted to come back here and live and he eventually did maybe about six years after he returned from World War I. I can remember a few things in New Zealand because I was four years of age when I came to Australia. We came

01:30 over on a ship called the Ulamaroa, which was a single-funnel coal-burning ship. It took, I think it was four days and five nights to come from Wellington and I can remember parts of the trip over and one of the greatest sights I did see, a friend of our family was also on the ship and he took me on deck as we came into Sydney Harbour and I've never seen anything as beautiful.

02:00 It's something that's stayed in my mind all my life.

So as a four year old that's very early memories for childhood isn't it, as a four year old coming to a new country? So who did you come with? Who was part of your family?

My mother and two older brothers. My father was already in Australia and he'd organised accommodation and whatnot and had a job to go to at that time.

02:30 **So your dad had migrated the family here not long after the end of the First World War?**

That's right, I was four years of age so that would make it 1927 when he, I'm trying to work out his age. He was very young. He had his 18th birthday in Gallipoli so by the end of the war he would have been 21. My mother was three years younger when they married so

03:00 they were fairly young. My mother would have been in her mid-20s.

So where did you settle in Australia?

At Balmain. My father had a job to go to at the dockyards (UNCLEAR) and we shifted two or three houses around until he got something more settled. The first was in Macquarie Place at Birchgrove

03:30 and from there I could walk to school with my brothers. My mother was a member of the mothers' club from then until she left living in Balmain in about 1944, so she stayed on as a working member of the mothers' club and she was secretary.

So were there any other New Zealanders that you knew in Balmain?

Yeah. There was another family that we knew and

04:00 I had an auntie that lived at Coogee, my mother's oldest sister. She was a nurse working in the repatriation hospital at Randwick and she lived at Coogee, close by to the Randwick Repat [Repatriation] Hospital. We'd often go over to visit her and Coogee Beach. In those days they had a beautiful pier that went right out and separated the shark proof enclosure, which was the southern end of Coogee, and the north end.

04:30 On a Sunday the race horses would be bought down to exercise on the beach and also they'd take them out for a swim in a rowing boat if the seas weren't running, and on one occasion I was there and the trainer of the horse let me hop on his back while he took him out for a swim. I remember that very well.

I'm curious about how New Zealanders, how Kiwis, were accepted by Australians.

05:00 **What were relations like?**

I wouldn't know. I'd never considered myself anything other than Australian from the time I arrived and I don't think, I can't even recall anyone asking me was I anything but an Australian. Many of my friends in later life were very surprised to know that I was born in New Zealand,

05:30 but being educated here I speak as an Australian does. I haven't got the broad Kiwi accent. I can't remember my mother or father having an accent like that either.

Can you tell us about your schooldays at Birchgrove?

Oh yeah. I had a lovely time at Birchgrove. The Birchgrove School was right next door to the Balmain Coal Mine and the mine had closed just prior to us coming to Australia

06:00 but they still had pit ponies underground and one of my school friends, his older brother was looking after the ponies, feeding them. So I was asked I think would I like to see the ponies underground, so I went down and taken down in the shaft and saw these pit ponies being fed. And when I announced it at the meal

06:30 that night at the table, I said to my father, "Oh, I saw the pit ponies today," and he wanted to know what that was all about of course and when he found out I'd been underground in the mine, particularly an old coal mine, I learnt not to go under there again.

Why did he react like that to you going down there?

My father? Protective of his young boy and

07:00 knowing the dangers of mines. This was a disused mine. They'd stopped operating. It's still there as far as I know. Oh no, wait on, there's housing there now but right up to after the war the mine was still there but they were producing oil from the shale, so it was converted to another energy source.

07:30 **And can you tell me what the pit ponies are?**

Oh, they drag the trucks underground. The miners would pick out the coal with picks, working man labour and they'd fill up a truck. Maybe the truck would hold a ton of coal, I don't know but I guess it would be round about a ton and the pony then would

08:00 pull these trucks out that were on rails, pull them out to where they could transfer the coal from underground to the surface and then out for distribution.

So they were still being used in the mine when you went down?

Oh no, the mine had closed but the ponies were still there. I believe if they had brought them up from underground they'd lose their sight and I've got an idea that they probably were destroyed underground eventually and brought up

08:30 dead, but I don't know.

So what about your education at school?

It was a pretty standard type of education. You were taught with the aid of a cane and if you didn't get things right you'd one or two cuts and if you were really bad you could score four.

09:00 But teachers, some of the teachers used to delight in giving you the stick, as we called it, but that was life, that was normal life. But I enjoyed it being there. I played football at that school for the school, represented the school in athletics and even in the school swimming, so I was very keen about sport, and always have been, right through my life.

09:30 **And your dad was working down at the dockyards, what sort of work was he doing?**

Well in those days it was repair work on ships that required different work. He'd only be called into work as the jobs arrived, even before the Depression, which started two or three years after we went to live in Balmain, but it was intermittent work. It wasn't on a permanency

10:00 basis, but he was always pretty dirty because he'd come home covered in grease and whatnot.

So there wasn't a lot of money in the family?

Oh in those days it wasn't too bad. We ate properly and had shoes and all those sorts of things, clothing. My mother, she of course didn't work. Very few

10:30 married women worked. They looked after their families. Those days, prior to the Depression hitting, it was a pretty good life.

So tell me about the Depression years. What were they like for you?

Well that was an entirely story. It wasn't long before we felt that. We had to leave the house we were living in. They didn't own the house, they rented it and we went to a smaller place

11:00 that was less rent. That was the first thing and then from eating a leg of lamb of a weekend, that went off the menu, and right into the Depression in the '30s it wasn't unusual just to have a meal of potato only or if you were hungry when you came home from school, you'd get bread and dripping and put a bit of pepper and salt on it

11:30 to give it some taste and that's what you had. We didn't think we were deprived because nobody else was any better off and I knew very few people around the Balmain area that would have had a permanent job, mainly they were employed at the dockyards, either Mort's Dock or Cockatoo Island Dockyards.

So the dockyards were big dockyards?

Oh yes, huge.

12:00 Prior to the war, things started to get busy from about I'd say about 1937 when there was a big move to build new warships. War was obviously on the horizon. I've seen the keels of many ships laid and been at the launching of quite a number of ships at Cockatoo Island. I was a choir

12:30 boy then and our church was the official, what would you call it? I suppose the diocese, the dockyards took in that diocese and our vicar would always be present at the launching of a ship. He never, he was not doing the christening but he'd be there to do the dedication and they'd have the choir there to sing and all this sort of thing. It was pretty good but we got paid for that. I think it was sixpence

13:00 each for performing at the launch of the naval ships. I saw a lot of them launched, the [HMAS] Swan and the [HMAS] Yarra, two of the early ones. The Yarra was the famous ship that went down in the Sunda Straits with the Perth round about the same time.

13:30 **So they were being built at the dockyards?**

Oh yes, yes, quite a huge program of shipbuilding and also the armour plating of the HMAS Australia. They put some armour plate around the hull. I think it was about eight-inch plate, eight-inch thick plate went around the hull, the lower hull as protection against torpedoes.

14:00 That happened to the Australia but she was the only one I can remember being armour plated then. But I saw the overhaul of the [HMAS] Adelaide. That was a bit of a waste of money I think, then there were other better ships came along but I was in the army when that happened, the [HMAS] Arunta and the [HMAS] Warramunga, beautiful ships, Tribal Class destroyers.

14:30 A number were built at Cockatoo. I think many of the small sloops, the Bathurst Class sloop, I think they call them frigates, I'm not sure. I'm not a navy man.

So just tell me about the Adelaide, when did you see that being overhauled?

That was just prior to the war or in the

15:00 early stages of the war. The HMAS Adelaide was a very light cruiser. It was probably built towards the end of World War I and they upgraded it by putting heavier cannon or an extra cannon on the ship and when it went out for trials they fired the largest shells and the bridge

15:30 apparently collapsed. After that they didn't bother rebuilding the bridge. They just put a canvas canopy over it so it must have been pretty hectic being at sea and on the bridge of the Adelaide, if they were in a fairly heavy storm. But it only did convoy work around Australia, they didn't take it away from. I think once it cleared the Fremantle area it came back to escort other convoys. I don't think

16:00 they could trust it too far away from the dockyard.

So you spend a lot of time down at the dockyard, so it sounds? Did you go down with your dad or…?

No, I had a friend who lived on Cockatoo Island and I'd go over there of a weekend and they were scrapping, in 1936 they were scrapping ships. There was this disarmament agreement throughout the world. The League of Nations decided they were going reduce the naval strength

16:30 of different countries and I can remember the old Tattoo and the original [HMAS] Anzac being dismantled at Cockatoo Island. A fellow by the name of Stacey bought these ships and they were known locally as 'Stacey's Battleships' but they dismantled them all and sold it for scrap. The hulls were then towed out through the Heads [North Head and South Head] of Sydney and the navy then would practice gunnery on them.

17:00 That was pretty normal. There'd be more of those hulls outside Sydney Heads I think than reefs, didn't go far off.

That sounds like it was quite exciting for a child?

It was good, yes it was a good life. It was hard but I enjoyed my boyhood. I had some good friends and we had a lot of fun.

Did you have many responsibilities

17:30 **at home?**

Oh yes, yes. Before I could go out, even when I had left high school, I had to polish the floor. We lived in a two-storey house and it was all linoleum on the floors. You got down on your hands and knees and polished it every Saturday morning and that was my job and my brothers, of course, had similar tasks, and you didn't go anywhere until the housework was

18:00 done. My mother had it made. She knew all about equal opportunity long before they thought of it here.

Good on her.

Yes, she was smart. She taught her boys to cook and my wife, Marge, can tell you that I could cook, do any housework, doesn't matter what it is, washing, ironing, it was all due to my mother. She trained us.

18:30 **So where did you come in the family?**

I was the third and last son. My mother had three boys, Colin, Alec and Keith, and quite often she'd get our names confused, particularly if she was annoyed with one of us. I used to laugh about it in those days but for many years I've been doing the same thing with my own two sons,

19:00 getting them confused.

And your mum worked at the school you said?

Oh yes, she was very interested in the Mothers' Club. Once a week they'd do the tuckshop and they'd have fetes and this sort of thing and also she was involved in the church with fetes and the Ladies' Auxiliary and things like that. She was very active in community, most of the women

19:30 were. They were very good. Naturally you got to know the women because they'd have meetings at the homes of a night time and you got to know who they were. You knew their children of course.

So what was the sense of community like in Balmain?

Oh it was very good. They had a Police and Citizens' Boys' Club of which we

20:00 three belonged and at the Boys' Club, there were police instructors who would teach you boxing, wrestling, debating and special interest groups. It was there I learnt to box. My two brothers boxed as well. I thought the Police Boys' Club was a great builder

20:30 of inward strength for lads. Kept them off the streets because in those days Balmain was not a very, it didn't enjoy a very high reputation. It was a pretty tough suburb in fact and the police kept the junior crims [criminals] to a low level mainly because of the activity at the club.

21:00 There were several hundred boys that belonged to that club.

So what sort of crime was there in Balmain?

Well there wasn't too much thieving because nobody had anything; it was a waste of time. I think it mainly it was the older, like the late teenagers hanging around street corners that didn't have a job and they'd congregate for company. They had a consorting

21:30 law in those days and the police had the right to move them along if anyone was standing around. If there were more than two or three in a group, they'd just shove them along because there was a lot of police out on patrol, foot patrol and they were well known. The fellows knew all the policemen. You knew them by name and quite often they'd know you. Not through any reason of getting into trouble because we were never in any trouble but

22:00 they knew who you were and they knew, they'd probably been in the Boys' Club and seen you train in there or do something. I can't ever recall anyone having a great problem with the police in Balmain, yet the suburb had a reputation of being a tough area.

What about down at the docks?

Probably that's where all the trouble would have been because

22:30 with the ships coming in there'd be seamen from other countries and there'd be girls hanging around, I guess. Well I don't guess, I know because I'd seen them. With your eyes open you knew what was going on. They'd generate problems particularly with the hotels right around the dockyards. I think at Mort's Dock within easy walking distance of the dock there could have been a dozen

23:00 hotels. Now days there'd probably be about three in that area. As a matter of fact one of the hotels in Balmain has been used in local films, Sir William Wallace. I was watching something on the air, on the TV the other night and I said to Marge, "That's the Sir William Wallace Hotel.

23:30 I know it." But that pub, lovely old pub, but in the days of the late '30s, well the '30s, the 1930s it was probably better known as the 'Blood House', had plenty of fights and whatnot.

You were a teenager during that time, the mid to late '30s?

I was born in 1923 so I would have been probably 13, 14, still going to high school.

24:00 **And your brothers were they attracted to the pubs and that life?**

No, no, the eldest brother was the treasurer at the local Methodist church and he on one occasion warned me not to have some jelly "because there's wine in that." He was very much a wowser [puritanical conservative] but a very nice bloke. He was a good fella. He was killed over in England.

24:30 He was a pilot in a Beaufighter, English spotter.

So he was killed during the war?

Yes.

What about your other brother?

I was closer to him than I was to the elder one because being the youngest I suppose he gravitated to the middle one and he was, the same interests as myself. He'd come over to Cockatoo Island quite

25:00 often with our friend and climb around the boats and ships that were in. He played, he was captain of the Boys', Police and Citizen Boys' Club Cricket team for many years. He was actively involved in sport. Played with me at Drummoyne Rugby Union Club. We both played over there in the, what was it?

25:30 1939, 1940 season, the beginning of the (UNCLEAR).

Just going back to the dockyards, can you describe for me what would happen when a ship from overseas would come in?

It depended on, invariably they had to be dry docked, so they'd have to pump out the water from the dock area, seal it off. They had a floating gate that would close off the dock area,

26:00 pump out the water while the ship was there and then of course that would then be called dry dock, which was dry dock. They had it propped up with heavy timbers so it couldn't tip and the work would carry on there. Whatever had to be done would be done while it was in dry dock. Very seldom would you see a ship moored alongside that they were working on. Generally they had to be dry-docked. There was only one

26:30 dock at that place at Mort's [Mort's Dock] and they had two in Cockatoo Island, the Fitzroy Dock and the Sutherland Dock. They were well known docks. When they were pumping the water out, that's when we'd be over there, quite often you'd get fish caught in the final area and we'd go home with a good fish meal.

27:00 **So ships that were coming from overseas, what were they? Were they cargo ships or what sort of ships were they?**

Oh yes, all cargo ships. Mind you, in those days, I don't think the, until the Awatea, a ship came, travelled between Australia and New Zealand, a Union Steamship Company, she was the first of I think the diesel engines. Prior to that they were all coal burning, pretty dirty. Some of them had two or three funnels. I knew every ship that

27:30 came into the harbour. They came from, the English, we called them the 'home boats', the ones that went to England and came home to here and you could tell by the colour of the funnels what shipping line they were. Like, P & O [Pacific and Orient] were yellow and what was the other one? One of them was black, black funnels and tan, I think it was the British India line, I forget now.

28:00 So hard to remember these things but you knew what the ships were by firstly identifying the number of funnels they had, the colours the funnels were painted and generally the outline of the ships. I probably could have recognised 90 percent of the ships that came in. Some of them, of course, didn't all come into dockyards. They were coming in piers to offload cargo, passengers.

28:30 All passenger travel of course was by ship in those days. It was nothing unusual to be shipped to Sydney to go by, to Sydney from Melbourne, or over to Perth by ship to Fremantle, that was the normal means of travel. Go to Brisbane, definitely go up by ship from there, transporting not only goods but passengers around the Australian coastline.

29:00 You can imagine the hive of activity around Sydney Harbour; you'd see two or three ships coming in every day.

So it made it very, there would have been quite an international flavour to the community around there. Were you meeting people from overseas?

Oh yes, sailors from different… In 1938 was the 150th

29:30 anniversary of the foundation of Sydney. They had many ships were in Sydney Harbour from navies of the world. I remember there was a couple of American ships there, Italian ships, Japanese, our friends.

But I met some Japanese at Elkington Park, which is a well-known park in Balmain, Birchgrove. This is where

30:00 the Dawn Fraser Baths is now, cause I knew Dawn Fraser, I knew her brother and she was much younger than the brother that I knew, probably 10 or 12 years younger, but I can remember her as a little tot. Well they named the baths after Dawn and that was the Elkington Park Baths and there were some Japanese there practicing samurai. They had the bamboo cover on the head and shoulders

30:30 and then with sticks and playing this game and probably taking a lot of photos of Cockatoo Island while they were about it.

This was back in the '30s you remember the Japanese people being there?

Oh yeah. Other interesting sailors on that were Chinese, who came out at the start of Japanese-Chinese war,

31:00 that was around about 1936 I think and these fellows were seamen, Chinese seamen, and gee they were a fine type of men. They were taking delivery of some tugs that had been converted over to put a small cannon on them and they were going to be river patrol boats and they were going to take them back to China to try and protect their river areas I guess. I don't what happened to them. I don't know if they

31:30 ever got back to China. You didn't know but gee they impressed me, they were very fine men. From then on, I had a lot of respect for Chinese people. Probably started when I was a boy, just seeing these fellows.

Can you remember what it was that impressed you? Was it something they did or…?

They were so friendly, they were a nice, friendly people and they'd be waiting to, right where we lived was the

32:00 Cove Street Wharf to catch the launches and ferries over to Cockatoo Island. I lived right near there, probably less than 50 yards away and they'd all have to, anyone coming down there would wait at the wharf until the launch came to pick them up so you got to see them then. Talking about that, that reminds me. That's where I first

32:30 saw Kingsford Smith. He was having a plane, an aeroplane fitted out at Cockatoo Island. They were doing the plane and he came in a tram down to Balmain and the word went around, "Smithy's on the tram," and he had a propeller he'd had made. Probably the propeller on this plane had been damaged and so I joined with the throng of other kids that ran after Smithy as he walked down past

33:00 where we lived to Cove Street Wharf to catch the launch, still with his propeller. No, I saw a few famous people now that I'm thinking about it. Eddie Scarf, the wrestler, the Olympic Wrestler, Eddie was well known before the war. He came to the Balmain Police Boys' Club to help our young wrestlers and show them a few things.

33:30 **I guess people arriving off the ships?**

Uh?

You had people from overseas arriving off the ships?

Well they didn't actually come off the ships at Balmain. They came off at Piermont and Darling Harbour, so I didn't see too many, mainly the ships that were coming in for repair. That's where you'd see them, overhaul and repair.

34:00 **So does that mean that you were down there nearly every day of your life as a child?**

Oh when I wasn't at school, I'd be around there because we'd often go and fish off the wharf, catch some fish for tea. I can recall several occasions during the Depression my mother said, "Well if you boys want anything to eat, you'd better go and catch some fish." So we'd have a piece of string and on the end we'd make a jag.

34:30 First of all, you had to get the squid for some bait. It wasn't hard to catch squid in those days, plenty of them around. You'd cut the, didn't think of eating it. That's calamari these days and we were actually using the best part of what we were catching as bait to catch other fish, but we caught leatherjacket and fish like that. There were many of them around because

35:00 there was plenty of feed for them around the wharf, natural feed for them, eating off the pylons, so there were always fish.

So can you describe to me how you made your fishing lines?

You mean the jag? I used a wooden peg and twisted up pins and put it on the end and then you'd tie that around with string so that they sat in place

35:30 and you had this jagged edge with maybe six or eight pins bent up and you get some silver from the cigarette packets. Get the silver paper and twist that around with cotton and that would attract them. They'd think when they saw the shiny silver paper in the water you did a jaggy movement and when

they'd see that they'd flash onto it thinking a young fish and of course put their tentacles around to grab the young

36:00 fish and they'd find out they're on the end of a jag, so you'd pull them up. We didn't consider that very skilful, catching squid.

So that was to catch the squid? The jag was on the end of a piece of string was that right?

Yeah, and also on the peg you had to weight it down with lead. You put a bit of lead around it to give it the weight and balance it off. It would sink,

36:30 just, and you'd keep moving it under water. I'd forgotten about that. It's important to have the lead there.

So then how did you catch the fish? What did you use to catch the fish?

Oh I'd cut the, oh we had a fishing line with normal fishhooks and just. They were mainly cord line. I don't think gut had come in much in those days, hadn't seen much gut line. That came later.

37:00 So then we'd bait up the hook, throw it in and hope for the best. Just leave it there long enough and end up with a fish; a hand line, no rod, just a hand line.

So there lots of people fishing I imagine down there?

Oh yeah, yeah, but it was never crowded, might be one or two there on the wharf. Everyone had their fishing

37:30 spots. Along where the Balmain Coal Mine wharf loading area was, was not far around from where we were, where the Cove Street Wharf was and a lot of them fished off there. It was the old part of loading, loading the coal on but in those days too they'd bring in wood, big logs of wood, unloaded them into the harbour and tied them

38:00 up off the coal mine, off the coal mine area and leave them in the water until they'd take them out to sell them. They had big timber mills further round from Elkington Park. There were other activities apart from the dockyard in Balmain. There was Lever Brothers, the big soap manufacturers and Colgate Palmolive, to name a few, and then there

38:30 was smaller dockyards. There was a lot of activity on boat-building, small craft, sailing boats, skips and little launches and things. There was a lot of smaller dockyards around the area, not just the large ones.

So there sounds like there was the opportunity for a lot of employment with those sorts of industries going on?

That's skilled employment, yes, that's

39:00 right. Many of the fellows I went to school with went onto tech [technical] school and then did a trade and became apprentices. I never did.

What about your dad? Was he trained?

He had served some period of his time as a coppersmith in a dockyard in Petone, New Zealand, called William Cables,

39:30 but I don't know, no, he was not fully qualified as a tradesman, but he had some early training. See he went to the war when he was 17. As I said he had his 18th birthday on Gallipoli. There were a lot there younger than him. It would have been a great old baptism of fire, wouldn't it? And then

40:00 go onto France and Belgium, he fought on those fronts. He went right through the war and didn't get a scratch and he was a combat soldier, amazing. He had a brother killed there too.

Tape 2

00:32 **You were talking about your dad and how he'd been in the First World War and he didn't get injured, he didn't get physically injured, but do you think that there was any emotional or psychological impact on him?**

Oh yes, for many years I couldn't understand why he drank so much but after I'd experienced war myself I knew, I appreciated his problems.

01:00 He'd have seen a lot worse than what I ever did.

Did he talk to you about his war experiences?

No, no, he wouldn't. On one, I can recall it would be about the mid-1930s we went into Anzac Day dawn service, and he wanted to go in.

01:30 It must have been a commemorative time for him, might have been 20 years after, that's probably what it was, 1935, cause I was young, and my mother took the three of us the boys in, to see this dawn service at the cenotaph in Sydney in Martin Place and he broke up completely then, that day.

02:00 **And so that was the first time you realised?**

He never went in to another one. No, I didn't understand. I just thought he was, that he might have been disappointed that he wasn't going to a reunion because he didn't

02:30 go to one. No, he never spoke about it, never asked.

So did he have drinking buddies who'd been through the war with him?

Oh yes, they mightn't have been with him but he had mates like that he'd drink with. And of course drink and the Depression didn't help much on the home front. My grandfather used to send money over from New Zealand for him.

03:00 Every month he'd send him over five pound. He'd wrap it up in an Auckland Weekly which is a well known weekly paper and put it through the mail and this five pound would arrive and it was in those days the New Zealand pound was equal value to the English pound so it was worth six pound. He'd send him over virtually six pound every month but that went, I'd say five pound of that went on beer.

03:30 **So how was your mum coping with all of that?**

Oh probably like a lot of other mothers. In those days they'd just tolerate it and she probably understood that he was going through a bad patch, but I know it did distress her a lot but I never heard them arguing over it.

So when he was able to get work at the dockyards, would that make a difference?

Oh yes, when he had something to occupy his mind he

04:00 was entirely different. I can remember he worked very hard. They had one breakdown job at the dock and he had to work 36 hours straight and he just worked 36 hours straight. Came home for an evening meal and then back to work. They had to keep going on the job. Once he had something to occupy his mind I think he was good. You have to understand he was a relatively young man.

04:30 He was still young.

So the build up to the war was happening from about the mid-30s, what was your sense of it? Were you anticipating the war coming and had you thought about whether you would join up or?

Oh yes, yes, you knew there was going to be a war. The night war was declared I was over in Drummoyne with my brother

05:00 and we'd been down training at the Drummoyne Oval. The season was over but we were still training for something. I can't recall what it would be. We went up to the local milk bar opposite the Cairo Theatre in Lyons Road in Drummoyne and we heard then that war had been declared and I said, "I'm going to join the army." Different matter when the time came.

05:30 **What about down at the dockyards? Did you see any evidence of the impending war?**

Oh yes, you could see it building up with the warships being built.

When was this? Prior to 1939?

Yes, I'd say from about 1936 onwards, '37, that there was quite a bit of activity in laying, they were building ships, warships.

06:00 Can't recall the names of a lot of them at the moment but I'd have a record of it somewhere. As a matter of fact in a photo there I've got a photo of the, a French warship that was in being overhauled just before the war, the Jeanne d'Arc.

So they were working on foreign ships as well as Australian ships?

Oh yeah, the French were our allies.

06:30 **What did this mean for your dad as far as employment went?**

Uh? I missed that?

What did it mean for your dad as far as getting a job?

It meant he was in constant employment, like he, a permanent job, something he hadn't experienced probably since he'd enlisted himself in 1915.

07:00 Oh, it made a difference to their lives. They bought a holiday house, they didn't pay for it right out but they had enough money to put on a holiday house at Harbord, where they eventually went and lived, and he had enough to meet his mortgage payments on that, so it meant a lot.

07:30 I don't know how much he earned a week but they got paid overtime rates if they were working. He liked to get on what he called an 'all-nighter' because they got on time and a half and then if he worked on a Sunday it would be double time, so he didn't mind that.

And what about the other industries, like the Lever Company was there in the suburb, was there evidence

08:00 **in the other industries?**

Not that I can recall, no. People were using soap. Probably when the war came it might have, well particularly the war in the tropics, they made a lot of difference to the Lever Brothers. They had a great product called Lifebuoy, Lifebuoy Soap, which was full of carbolic and it was a self-inflicted wound to have

08:30 this Lifebuoy Soap in your kit when you were in the army. The heat would bring out a rash on the body, so the war would have affected their business.

Is that what soldiers were being issued with, the carbolic soap?

No, no, you didn't get issued with things like that. You had to provide your own.

09:00 **So you were anticipating the war coming so you'd already started thinking about enlisting had you? So can you tell me about that period?**

Yeah, I'd just started work. I went to school to the end of the intermediate and I passed to go on to do matriculation but I didn't want to do it, so I got a job as a junior clerk at the James Hardie Trading Company in

09:30 the city. I suppose from about 19, soon after 1939, I wanted to join the army and I was 16 and my father said, "No, I'm not going to approve, sign any documents." You had to be signed, if you were under 21 you had to have parental approval. Your guardian had to sign it.

10:00 He said he wouldn't sign it so in 1940, towards the end of, just after I turned 17, that's right, in 1940 I heard that they were recruiting for the Armoured Car Regiment. It was not the AIF [Australian Imperial Forces], it was the AMF [Australian Military Forces], the Militia Force it was known in those days, but he wouldn't agree to me joining the AIF. He said young fellas were a nuisance. He said, "I was one and I know that I was a nuisance, you'd

10:30 be the same." So he said he wouldn't put any obstruction into me joining the Militia Force once I turned 14 [17?] so I joined that. My older brother was already in a Militia Force unit. He was in the 30th Battalion, which was a local battalion. They had a drill hall at Roselle, not far away from Balmain and he was in that

11:00 prior to him joining the Air Force. So I joined the 2nd Armoured Car Regiment out at Ashfield, a drill hall there and soon after I joined I went on what they called a cadre. That was learning weaponry and that sort of thing and from then on I acquired a good knowledge of guns, small arms.

11:30 **Why did you join that? Why did you join the armoured car division?**

They weren't a division, they were a regiment. It was because I knew that was one unit that was taking recruits. It was pretty hard to get someone to take young people. They knew you were underage, like no doubt about it. I didn't even shave until I was about 20, so they knew I was pretty much underage

12:00 but closed their eyes to it. I was very happy to be accepted in the 2nd Armoured Car Regiment. In early 1941 we went into camp at Glenfield, into a canvas camp. It was the first time that troops had been in there since World War I, so it was pretty run-down camp area. It had to be cleaned up and built

12:30 up and the first day I was there I was put on a fatigue [duty] to clean out a huge grease trap behind a kitchen, get down in the ground, about 10 feet down, go down a ladder and shovelling out this rubbish, oh putrid. And that day I'd had my injections. They gave you about three or four types of injections and I wasn't feeling too good.

13:00 That night I was laying on my palliasse, which was a straw mattress, jute bag full of straw, palliasse they call them, laying on that and I thought, "What the hell am I doing here? I could be at home in a comfortable bed." But I soon got used to it.

So was there anything about the actual work that you would be doing in the armoured car regiment that attracted you?

Mainly gunnery,

13:30 machine guns. In those days it was the Lewis gun [Lewis light machine gun] and the Vickers [medium] machine gun. I was always interested in guns.

So what had happened to your two older brothers by this stage? Had they enlisted?

No, the eldest brother was in this Victorian Scottish

14:00 Battalion, which was the 30th Battalion, and he was in camp at a place called Greta, northern New South Wales, when his acceptance for the air force came through and he left the army and went into the air force and did his training. He was commissioned at Point Cook [Victoria] and then when they went over to England and after a lot of conversion, different aircraft flying, he was finally,

14:30 I don't know what they'd call it in the air force, but anyhow he went into this Beaufighter [Bristol Beaufighter fighter] squadron for night fighting and protecting on bombing raids and things like that. My other brother he worked at Mort's Dock in the office there and he didn't join the air force until later

15:00 in the war. I think he joined up around 1944 or something. He was up in, not Bougainville, Borneo when the war finished.

So why didn't you join the navy?

I don't know. I probably thought as long as you've got two feet on the ground you've got a hope of survival.

You'd seen too many damaged ships, had you?

15:30 It might have been too. Could have been something like that. I had no interest in being a sailor even though I'd been, my whole interest had been around ships. That was a good question. I've never thought of that.

16:00 **You've never thought about why you didn't join the navy?**

No, no.

It's so obvious.

That was one minute, I thought, "Why didn't I join the navy?"

So okay, you joined the militia and where was that training again?

Glenfield, Glenfield Camp. There was rather one humorous incident there I must relate.

16:30 The 2nd Armoured Car Regiment was a bit of a toffy [posh] show. There was a few of the Sydney bluebloods [members of the upper class] belonged to it and I don't think they knew what the Depression was, but I did of course, and the first morning at breakfast we had curried sausages with rice and of course I thought this was great. Sausages I used to get about once a fortnight and

17:00 here I was getting them for breakfast so I was hopping into these curried sausages and rice and the fellow sitting alongside me, in his toney [articulated] private school voice said, "You're not eating that rubbish, are you?" I said, "Don't you like it?" He said, "No, I wouldn't eat this for breakfast." I said, "Give it to me cause I'll eat it," and so I had his share as well. I didn't object to the army food in those days.

17:30 Wasn't like that all the way of course, but wasn't a bad introduction.

So boys from all different walks of life were thrown together, weren't they?

Yes, and it's amazing. Initially there was a sort of division but when you're in a tent with five others, it didn't matter where you came from.

18:00 You had to hop in together. You had to keep your tent respectable, and keep it clean and work in together and you'd go on different jobs together. They had what they called guard duty and so it wasn't long before everyone levelled out but I'll tell you something about this Glenfield camp. They didn't have any sewerage. It was right on the Georges River. I don't know whether you know Glenfield in

18:30 Sydney? It's not far out of Liverpool. Nowadays it's all housing. There was no sewerage and they had what they called, they were like, it's hard for me to explain this to you because you've probably never experienced what was known as a 'dunny cart' [sanitary wagon/truck], but they're big huge, not barrels, but they were built like it. They were very solid construction. Not like the old

19:00 rubbish bin, which was light, but these were heavy construction. They'd put them up the end of each tent line of a night time and they were called, the fire picket of a morning had to empty them. So when you got someone on fire picket that you didn't like, they'd say, "Use that one bucket at the end of that squadron line" so you'd get up and use it so it was nice and full and when the poor coot had to go and empty it of a morning, he'd

19:30 be awash. Loved that. Another time there the sergeants were having a mess do. Of course there was no alcohol for the troops. Only the sergeants and officers had alcohol and they were having a formal dinner and they were getting right into the grog, so we slackened off their guy ropes on their tents,

20:00 just slackened them off. They had, the sergeants were in the first two tents in the line of each line and then they decided to have races over the, when the sergeants came to bed the fellas got in and started to run over the tents because you could run up and down tents, over these tents and of course crashed into the sergeants and there was hell to do [consequences] the next morning. Big parade to find out who the culprits were but nobody would own up. A lot of fun.

20:30 **Yeah, well I mean, yeah, everyone was pretty young. You were only young lads weren't you?**

Yeah, most of them were my age, like the troopers were my age, all out for a bit of fun. There was no theatre or anything like that you went to. You got leave, what was it? Every second weekend you'd get the two days off, go home.

21:00 Didn't have much to occupy your mind.

So how long was that training for?

It was three months and then I went back to work at Hardie Trading and it was about three months again after that I got called up for full time service. I got a telegram to say, "Report with your full gear, your uniform and gear,

21:30 you're in for full-time duty." So this was before Japan came into the war so we knew there was something was going on then. And you weren't allowed to leave, to transfer out of your unit, had to stay in it and try to build a decent rapport between the fellas in it.

So were you ready, like psychologically were you ready for full-time service?

Oh yeah, that was not a problem but I don't think Australia

22:00 was. They were far from it. I might add that up to this stage that even though I was a trained machine gunner, I had never fired a shot and never been to a rifle range to fire a shot. It was all done with dummy ammunition, loading, unloading, jamming and going through all these procedures.

You'd never fired a live shot, you'd just fired dummies?

Never fired a live shot and I wouldn't have been unique.

22:30 I think that would have applied to most of them.

So why was that?

I don't think they had the ammunition for a start. After the British pulled out of Dunkirk, they were grabbing all the spare rifles and everything they could here in Australia to send over to England, as I understand it and I believe that would be right.

23:00 Eventually the Lithgow Arms Factory was producing rifles and when you got a rifle it was a new one, not a World War I. No difference except it was new.

So they were the same design, they were the same type of rifle?

Oh yeah, Lee Enfield [calibre 0.303 inch rifle].

So the guns, you were trained on a Vickers and Lewis guns?

23:30 But never fired, it wasn't until later in my army life that I…I never fired a Lewis gun even though I actually instructed on Lewis guns later on in my army career. It would have been from late 1941 I was an instructor at Ingleburn Camp. By this time they'd called

24:00 for volunteers to go to Darwin so with two of my friends in the Armoured Car Regiment, we volunteered to go to Darwin. When we got to the Darwin Details Depot in Ingleburn, we didn't get on a draft to go to Darwin. We were kept there to train the other blokes who were on their way as reinforcements to the infantrymen.

24:30 So I was made an instructor and I was instructing on the guns and even then I hadn't fired a gun. I was the expert.

Were the guns that you trained on were they from the First World War as well?

Oh yeah, yeah, they were old ones. The Lewis, I believed they used the Lewis in New Guinea in 1943. One of

25:00 our commanding officers spoke about it, the last time a Lewis was used up in New Guinea, 1943. They were totally unsuitable. Although they were a light machine gun they were not suitable for jungle warfare. The Bren gun, of course, became the main weapon.

Why weren't they any good for jungle warfare?

Oh they were too heavy for a start and they had pannier feeds up the top, 50 rounds in a pannier, and they were too

25:30 awkward to carry and cumbersome. Not a good gun, not for that area.

What did you think of the Vickers gun?

The Vickers gun was used in New Guinea but only, not by our unit. We didn't use Vickers. Commando units travel pretty lightly and didn't carry any heavy weaponry. The heaviest we had was the Bren gun and I was the Bren

26:00 gunner at one stage, but I'd fired a lot of them.

Live ones?

Yeah.

So after you'd done three months, that's right and you were called up for full-time service what happened? How did your dad feel about you being called up?

Didn't worry, didn't worry. If it did, he didn't say anything. My mother of course,

26:30 she was concerned but nearly every boy in the street was in the forces. Everywhere we looked there were people in uniform.

So where did you go to when you went? What was the first thing?

Eventually I got to Darwin and then I went to an intelligence

27:00 school at Winnellie [suburb of Darwin]. Soon after I arrived I was sent to this intelligence school and I didn't like the unit I was with and I met a man from the 6th Division Cavalry. They were just come back from the Middle East and went up to Darwin together with two infantry battalions from the 19th Brigade, the 2/4th and the 2/8th Battalions and at that stage of course it looked as though the Japanese could have come down through Timor into

27:30 Darwin. They were building up quite a force. So I met this fellow and I told him after the school was finished, the intelligence school, I was going to call into the 2/4th Battalion and see if they'd take me. I wanted to transfer out. I was a sergeant but I was quite happy to drop the rank to get away from where I was.

How did you become a sergeant?

28:00 Oh, mainly through instructing.

Oh okay. Sorry but I was wanting to know what happened when you were first called up, where did you go to?

Oh, I'm sorry. Went out to Cowra, Cowra camp and did training there with the armoured cars and did a few exercises with some motorised infantry that originally were Light Horses. They had horses originally. When we

28:30 were in Glenfield camp, early in 1941, we did an exercise with the 1st Cavalry Division, and they were all on horseback. Oh it was wonderful to hear them early in the morning jingling past with their horses and the horses clomping. There were so many of them then, probably five or six thousand of these horses.

So did people expect that the horses would be used in the war?

The residents of Camden mightn't have been too happy

29:00 cause that's where the stud was held and of course of a morning they were firing blank cartridges and made a hell of a noise. They thought the war had come to Camden, horses galloping all over the place. Nobody knew what the exercise was all about but that didn't matter.

But it was expected that the horses would be used in battle?

I think that had the Japanese arrived the horses would have

29:30 been used a lot up in the north cause you couldn't move vehicles around much in the Darwin area when the rain came. They even had mules up there but I'm going ahead of myself.

Okay, so tell me about Cowra and what sort of training there?

Oh, Cowra was quite good. We heard the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbour and that was when I volunteered to go to Darwin.

30:00 **So what sort of vehicles were you trained in and…?**

Oh they mainly had armoured cars. They had quite a few of them, could have been a dozen I suppose and machine gun carriers, Bren gun carriers, starting to get a bit of equipment then. Australia was producing, manufacturing Bren gun carriers. Some of them, the Australian design and

30:30 although they were called Bren gun carriers, the main armament on the Bren gun carrier was actually a Vickers gun. The Vickers was at the front next to the driver and there was a Bren there for anti-aircraft, but I suppose the proper term would be machine gun carriers.

So can you recall all the different skills that you were trained in?

Oh yeah,

31:00 by the time I'd joined the 6th Division Cavalry, I'd become a motorcyclist. I joined the motorcycle corps out there, the troop, the motorcycle troop and we were attached to what they called the fighting troops. They were the ones with the machine gun carriers. You'd be attached to them running despatches all over the place if they wanted,

31:30 if they didn't want to use the wireless they'd, if you had a message to take you'd just take it. It was good. I enjoyed being a motorcyclist.

What was the terrain like?

It was actually ground you would have been fighting on if the Japanese came. You were getting to learn it. You were learning the surrounding areas. This regiment I was with

32:00 we were patrolling right out to the Daly River, right out round there and there was a lot of country.

Can you describe the country?

Uh?

Can you describe the country?

Oh it was mainly flood plains when the wet season came. You couldn't move. When the dry [dry season] was on, the dry season was the southern winter, from the north. You were more or less riding

32:30 in dirt, in dust, heavy dust. The timber was pretty poor quality timber excepted when you were close to the river, like on the Daly River, or any of the big rivers. The Adelaide River was lovely timber but getting back from the river it was pretty craggy bush. Saw a lot of natives there of course, Aboriginals in their natural state living

33:00 in their tribal ways. They were pretty interesting people.

Did you have much contact with them?

Oh yeah, yeah, whenever we'd set up a camp they'd come around if they were in the area, come around and they were, I think they'd been recruited, some of them had been recruited to report any movement that they'd see around the coastline. We'd heard reports that a Japanese submarine had come up the Daly River.

33:30 It was a huge river, the Daly, and apparently the report came from these natives. Didn't see any evidence but we learnt after that the Japanese had actually landed there somewhere. Sent a reconnaissance party but you'd expect that.

So they'd come over to your camp?

Uh?

The local, the native people would come over to your

34:00 **camp?**

Oh yeah, see we'd get them to catch some fish, some barramundi, and they'd spear them and we'd pay them for it with different things, give them tobacco in exchange and wasn't much good giving them money, salt and things like that and they were, I saw one initiation ceremony where they initiated a young bloke and apparently they

34:30 didn't like outsiders seeing it but they didn't mind us looking.

Did they invite you to the ceremony?

No, we invited ourselves but we kept well away from where it was going on just in case they objected. Oh you did nothing to upset them and out on the, actually out on the, we had a patrol set up on the mouth of the Daly at a place called Redcliffe in Anson Bay,

35:00 a set position and to report any Japanese bombers coming over. Quite often to bomb Darwin they'd come up the Daly. They'd pick the Daly River out and then use that as a landmark and bomb Darwin on the way out. So they could bring, if you were on the wireless they didn't ring through but sent a Morse code message through, "The Japanese are coming over." So it was a pretty important place and the two tribes out there were actually at war,

35:30 the Brinken and the Walgett tribes. I wasn't there but I heard the story. One of them had come in with a spear in his backside and our RAP [Regimental Aid Post] fellow had just cut the end of the spear off and

extracted the barbed part from out and he was around the camp for quite a while, while his wound was healing and he wanted to learn how to use the 'ha-ha' gun. That was the Bren gun and they thought they were not going to teach him how to use that or that Bren would go off

36:00 and there'd be a mighty old war go on. But they did fight one another, the tribal fights were on. They weren't just one big happy family. They had their territories and they kept to them. A bit like Europeans, aren't they?

So but they had the army there, had kind of moved into their territory?

Mm, I don't think they saw anything wrong with that. If they did

36:30 they certainly didn't show any animosity.

And was there a leader amongst the tribe?

Didn't notice, didn't notice. See we were not encouraged to get really close to them. They lived their life and the idea was to leave them alone.

So any other experiences that you remember from Cowra?

From Cowra?

37:00 No, not really. You'd get leave every Friday night if you were lucky, go into the town of Cowra and have a few beers, come back home, go to the pictures, come back home.

Did you have any girlfriends during that time?

No, some of them might have but I didn't.

What do you mean you'd get leave if you were lucky?

Oh well, you might

37:30 get a job around the camp. The guards were mounted and there were certain duties around the camp that were allocated. If you didn't have any duties and the leave bus would go in and you could go into Cowra. So you were lucky if you had nothing on. Not much good having a girlfriend in Cowra, you'd never know when you'd see her.

38:00 The camps weren't in the town incidentally, they were out a few miles.

How did you get into town?

On the truck, the army truck. We'd all hop in the back and off you'd go.

And how did you get home again?

The same way, it would leave at a certain time from a certain place and you had to be there. I can't recall anyone walking so they must have all made it.

So, I'm

38:30 **not clear here. By that stage had you joined the AIF?**

No, I didn't join the AIF because they weren't accepting militia men into the AIF at that stage but when they did I joined the AIF in Ingleburn, when I was in Ingleburn, but I don't think my papers came through from quite a lot of months after. I had what was called an NXM number [army number allotted on enlistment. N=NSW, X=AIF, M=Militia]. I had an N number,

39:00 9864 was my number and when I joined the AIF, or signed on to join the AIF, I became NX and it wasn't for probably well over 18 months later that I got an NX number on it's own. It was all done by clerks and I suppose they had more important things to do than to worry about numbers.

I thought they were VX numbers?

That's for Victorians. Each state had a,

39:30 South Australia was SX, Tasmania had TX, WX for Western Australia and QX for Queensland and NX for.

You're the first New South Welshman we've interviewed.

So that's how they allocated numbers. But I was in the AIF, I'd signed up for the AIF long before I was taken into the 6th Division Cavalry, so

40:00 I think it was round about early 1942 that they were accepting militia men to sign up for the AIF.

Is that something you really wanted to do? You knew you wanted to be able to fight overseas?

Mm, yeah, I thought when I joined the army I'd eventually go and fight but it took a long while before I got there.

40:30 **So how long were you at Cowra for and that training?**

Oh probably about, I was probably there only two months before I went to Ingleburn.

So you went directly from Cowra to Ingleburn?

Yes. Went to the Sydney Showgrounds first to get a medical; had to be medically fit to go up there [to Darwin] and from I went out to Ingleburn

41:00 and stayed there for four or five months I suppose, as an instructor.

Tape 3

00:32 **Okay Keith, we were talking just before about that move from Cowra to Ingleburn, can you tell us the events, the circumstances in which that happened?**

I think I mentioned that three of us accepted a, oh, it was an invitation to go to Darwin. They called for volunteers for Darwin and three of us went in there

01:00 to the Darwin Details Depot at Ingleburn to await draft for Darwin but that didn't happen for quite a few months, but then in the meantime I was then instructing on the Vickers gun. At the camp, I'd been promoted to a sergeant and was more or less on the instruction staff. I could see no end to that and I had to get out and then I found out that there was a

01:30 draft going up that required three sergeants, so these two friends and myself joined that particular unit and went to Darwin. I wasn't very happy about being in that unit. It was a non-combatant unit. After all, all my army career I'd been trained to be a fighting soldier and there I was as a non-combatant.

What was the nature of that unit?

Oh, it was field laundry and they were attached to an AGH [Australian General Hospital]

02:00 at Adelaide River and I couldn't see anything, any future there and I commented to the OC [Officer Commanding] of this unit that I wasn't happy about it and he thought he could quiet me down a bit I suppose, so he sent me off to a school at Winnellie and it was at that school that I did an intelligence course and then met a fellow from the 6th Div Cav [Division Cavalry].

02:30 And I mentioned to him on the way back to the Adelaide River from Winnellie after the school was over, that I intended dropping into the 2/4th Battalion to see whether I could transfer into, it was a well known 6th Division infantry battalion. But he said, "Why go there? Why don't you join our unit, the 6th Division Cavalry?"

03:00 I said, "Yeah, I'd like to," and he said, "I'll tee it up for you with the adjutant for you to get paraded to the adjutant," so he dropped me a line. There was a lot of correspondence, there was no signals or anything like that and he dropped me a line and he said, "It looks good. Why don't you come down for an interview?" So I went down on the off chance and the adjutant immediately saw me and he was quite happy with my background of

03:30 training, coming from an armoured car regiment and as a trained machine gunner that I'd be acceptable into the unit and I was very happy. For that situation, I dropped rank of course. I became a trooper again.

So that was AIF?

Oh yes.

And when had you actually put your name down for the AIF?

It was just after Japan came into the war but it took months for them to do anything about it. I had what they called an NXM

04:00 number, I think I mentioned that earlier too. It was my old militia number with an X and an M in front of it meaning I was AIF ex-militia I suppose. Anyhow, I was very happy to be accepted into the 6th Div Cav. They had a wonderful record. They were a well-known regiment and had a terrific history over in the Middle East and so.

How long had they been back in Australia?

Oh, they'd been back in Australia when

04:30 Japan entered the war. They'd brought the 6th Division home. Some of them, the 16th and 17th Brigade went up to the fighting in New Guinea. As a matter of fact, the 16th Brigade took over from the militia when the withdrawal from Kokoda they did the fighting back there. So the 6th Division Cavalry I think had been up there since about June '42. They had to leave when they came back and went to the

territory. So

05:00 I was very happy there and went into the motorcycle troop and I had a lot of good friends and they were friends of mine for the next three years of the war.

Before we continue with that, you were saying before, you were telling us about that intelligence school, intelligence training and that you didn't really take to that? What were the problems with that?

Oh no, I took that alright, the intelligence school I liked very much.

05:30 It was just the unit I didn't like, the unit I'd gone to the Northern Territory.

What was the problem with the unit?

Oh they weren't my idea of being soldiers and the fella that was OC of it, the captain, I don't think he'd been in the army more than six weeks. He owned his own dry cleaning and laundry business and probably for the job

06:00 he was probably ideal, but they weren't soldiers.

But you were still learning intelligence techniques, were you?

Oh yeah, yeah, at the school at Winnellie I learnt quite a lot.

Was that still useful for later on?

My word, map reading, navigation by the stars of a night time and studying ground areas and drops in the levels of the field which helped you

06:30 later on when you were fighting. You knew when it was safe to move because you could, you had a feel for the layout of the land. That was the type of thing you learnt. You learnt how to sketch, to do rough maps of an area. They'd take you into an area of a day exercise and leave you there for about a couple of hours and you had a good look around and then you had to come back and do a diagram of the area

07:00 and pick out all the salient features and all that sort of thing. It was very good training.

And we mentioned briefly before some of the night training?

Doing it of a night time, reading the stars and travelling without compass, and all that sort of thing and also you learnt how to use a compass.

Were you in that part of the world when any of the air raids happened?

There were air raids up there, yes, when I was up there. The air raids were still going on when I left the Northern Territory.

07:30 **Did you have any specific memories of those?**

Oh yes, I can remember the first air raid on Fenton Aerodrome. It was located a couple of miles from our position on the Eighty Mile, no wait on, the Ninety-Eight Mile Creek we were. That's 98 miles from Darwin, on the main southern road and Fenton Airstrip was just a couple of miles further along. Well, the Liberators [B-24 Liberator bombers] were an American strip.

08:00 The Liberators had had a successful raid over some area north of Darwin and on the way back the Japanese followed them in, so whether they came off aircraft carriers or not, I don't know. But we counted over 50 bombers and there would have been at least a dozen fighter planes escorting them and we noticed, it was only two miles, it sounds a long way but it's very close when

08:30 there's an air raid. And I noticed there was a single Japanese in the centre and he wriggled his wings. In other words, he was the only one that was a bomber and at that time they let the whole lot go, so as soon they got the signal that the bomb aimer was on, they let all their bombs go. And on the second raid, which was not long after, there were 13 Liberators we counted on the ground burning. I went down with a couple of my mates on the bike,

09:00 said, "Let's go down and see what's going on down there," so cranked up the motorbike and had a look and counted 13 of them along the strip. They didn't even have time to get them off the strip and the Americans weren't too happy about us being there. They told us to get to hell out of there so we did after we'd have a look. Anyway there was a second raid, with a similar number of aircraft the next time and by this

09:30 time Spitfire [British fighter aircraft] pilots were there and as a matter of fact I knew two of the pilots. Later on they worked with me at the Hardie Trading Company, a fellow by the name of John Bisley, who was given the Malta Cross, and Tim Goldsmith. He was one of the leading aces. He shot down quite a few German planes over Malta, but anyhow,

10:00 I'm digressing a little there and they went up and I think they got the Spitfires up too early because a few of them had to come down and we were looking, that night I went out on a truck with the Don R [despatch rider] corporal, the motorcycle corporal and he grabbed me and he said, "We've got to go

looking for these airmen. There's some of them down," and we went out in a truck and just in case any Japs [Japanese] were down too, we had to be very careful. We found one Japanese plane anyhow.

10:30 They were all dead inside. I pulled out a belt of 1,000 stitches, which was the prayer belts the Japanese had, and they were beautiful, all the stitching around from their families put it in. I don't know the custom of it but just knew it was the belt of 1,000 stitches. Had a bit of blood on it and I wrapped it up anyhow and sent it home to my mother and when I came home on leave from the

11:00 Northern Territory and said, "Where's that belt of the 1,000 stitches?" she didn't know what I was talking about. I said, "I sent you down a, it was like a canvas belt," and she said, "Oh that thing. I burnt that. That was covered in blood." That would have been a great thing to have these days because there wouldn't have been too many of them around.

What was that like for a young man to be experiencing these air raids and coming across the wreckage?

Oh it was just exciting to see it. You weren't on the end of the bombs.

11:30 It's a different matter if I'd been on Fenton Strip and they were dropping on my head and I wouldn't have been too happy, but I was far enough away to be safe, well and truly safe I might add, but to see the spectacular of the raids and the dogfights when the Spitfires were into them on the second raid, it was very interesting. They shot a few of them down.

So this is when you're already with the 6th Div?

12:00 I was with the 6th Div Cav at that stage.

So the friends who you went up with from Ingleburn, did they stay?

No, they didn't come with me. That was the last contact I had with them. I don't think I've seen them since.

So what were you tasked with once you joined 6th Div Cav?

I was in the motorcycle section and we were attached to what they called the fighting troops.

12:30 Really to understand a regiment's set up, a regiment is split into three fighting squadrons of which there is about four fighting troops in each fighting squadron and they all acted independently on surveillance and they'd be patrolling even in the carriers, making sure there was no Japanese around. They'd been particularly round this Daly River, Litchfield area.

13:00 Litchfield was a place I knew very well and Tipperary Homestead were places we went into quite often. Got a meal when you went in there at Tipperary.

What was the Tipperary Homestead?

Well, that was one of the big cattle holdings up there and it was run by a Mr and Mrs Byrne. He was a World War I digger and I understand she was a nurse. I think she said she was a nurse from World War I and married this fella and they were running the Tipperary Homestead,

13:30 which was a big cattle run. And they gave us permission to shoot any of their, if wanted a beast to shoot it but to make sure that we burnt the carcass after we were finished and also when we were out if we saw any scrubbers, that's a scrubber bull with two or three cows around him, to shoot the scrubber and get rid of him, cause it reflected in the genes of the calves that were born. They didn't want the

14:00 cows breeding with inferior bulls, so we'd shoot these scrubbers and just burn them and if we wanted something good to eat we'd shoot that and it was beautiful beef. I ate well there. There was barramundi, this is when you're away from regimental headquarters and you're out with the troops, scrub turkey, ate well, beef.

So you were now working with men from the

14:30 **6th Div who'd come back from North Africa, the Middle East, and what was that like, to have them as men like that working alongside you?**

They were a good lot of blokes and they welcomed, I wasn't the only recruit to come into the unit in a similar fashion. There was a fellow from Cowra, Keith Telfer and Rod Dunwoodie, just to name a couple, and what was his name? Townsend. They

15:00 came from NA, what was it? Northern Territory Observer Unit, UR, NAUR [2/1st Northern Australia Observer Unit (NAOU)]. They were patrolling on horseback these fellows, but they got out and came into 6th Div Cav and Jack Babekuhl, another bloke I knew from 19th Battalion but I wasn't the only one. There were quite a number of blokes accepted because they were losing officers to the armoured division. The well experienced officers were going to the

15:30 armoured division.

Why was that?

Well, the armoured division was being built up down south at Puckapunyal and they needed experienced people that had worked on mechanised equipment and several of them were promoted to colonel, COs [Commanding Officers] in the, and also there was Brigadier McArthur-Onslow, he'd been a CO of 6th Div Cav. He had a brigade, an armoured brigade, and

16:00 naturally he'd be calling on fellows that he knew in the 6th Div Cav, so there were a lot of vacancy because there was promotion from within. It was not from without, it was from within, and they were creating vacancies in the lower ranks and as a result they, actually, I didn't realise it at the time but I thought that I'd scored when I was accepted but I think they were quite happy to build up their ranks.

And how was that for you, you were a

16:30 **sergeant, is that right before you?**

No, I'd relinquished my rank. I'd dropped off when I joined. They wouldn't take me in as a sergeant cause I had no experience in that field of operation; it would be ridiculous.

So what was seen as the intention for the cavalry units?

I thought the 6th Division Cavalry might have gone back to the Middle East when the, that was my personal opinion and it was held by many members. They thought they'd be going back to the Middle

17:00 East because there was no room for mechanised units in Australia and the Japanese by the time the 6th Division Cavalry and the 19th Infantry Brigade came away from the Northern Territory the threat of invasion was over, like they were bringing units back. At one stage they must have had over a quarter of a million men up there but I think they just throttled that right back and that was the general

17:30 idea, that maybe they'd go back to the Middle East with the Armoured Division. The Armoured Division were expecting to go there, but it didn't happen.

So what was, how long were you with the division before the move to New Guinea?

To where?

To New Guinea, before you went?

Oh there was quite a lot happened in between. The, as I say, the expectations were to go away overseas again but that

18:00 didn't happen. We were then told, after we'd had leave from the Northern Territory and we were in a place out of Murgon and Kingaroy in Queensland, we were in the holding camp there, and we were told there that the unit was going to be restructured to operate on foot as commandos. And if you didn't want to go as a commando, you could transfer to any unit you wanted to and also they reclassified everyone

18:30 medically so you had to be A1 fitness and virtually volunteer to be a commando, and that's what happened. I was among about 100 fellows then that were left in the unit. We moved up to North Queensland and established first of all, a camp at Ravenshoe but that was disbanded and we went, because the 9th Division were being brought in there to Ravenshoe, and we were

19:00 sent to Wondecla, out of a place Wondecla, and established another place, and after Christmas 1943 we'd had a camp well and truly built and we started to get reinforcements from young fellas, trained at Canungra, as commandos. They'd done jungle infantry training and then extra training to be commandos. They were a good lot of blokes.

19:30 **Right, okay, went a bit too fast for me there, Keith. How long was it before, you said those decisions were made in Queensland, in Kingaroy?**

No, well, when we came back from the Northern Territory, it would have been about I think July '43. We had Christmas at Wondecla that year, so in December '43 we were at Wondecla. In between time, we were at Murgon and Ravenshoe

20:00 for about a month.

So before, okay, when you joined 6th Div Cav, what was a typical day for you? You said you were a sort of motorcyclist, what were you typically doing on a given day?

In the Northern Territory?

Yes.

Well you'd also do guard duty and probably and they'd do night exercises of a night time and you'd sleep during the day, get interrupted sleep. You were getting a lot of training in that regard, that's

20:30 with 6th Div Cav. Weapon training, firing weapons and using grenades and all that sort of thing so all the theory that I'd been instructing on 12 months earlier I was now getting practical experience with.

We really haven't discussed that in much detail, that period when you were instructing and

you'd never fired

21:00 **live ammunition.**

That's right.

Odd.

Wouldn't be unique I don't think.

But how confident were you when it came to teaching when you hadn't actually?

Oh full of confidence, I was 18 years of age. You had to be confident at 18. I was a seasoned digger.

And how did those you were instructing take to your…?

The older blokes?

Well yeah, in particular?

Oh no difficulty, no difficulty, none whatsoever.

21:30 They knew I was young but I didn't have any problems. I used to do a bit of boxing in my spare time too. I think that might have encouraged them to pay attention when I gave an order. But at Ingleburn camp, this is going back now, Don Althaldo, who was the great strongman of Australia, a lovely bloke, Don Lyons, he ran a gymnasium there like to keep the blokes fit. They'd

22:00 do physical training, to fill the day in, PE [Physical Education] instruction and Don had a ring rigged up [set up] there and I used to go down there of an afternoon when I'd be off duty and do a bit of a workout. The boys knew that I could fight.

Were there any sort of organised tournaments?

Oh yes I fought in a tournament one Sunday. They had a TV [television], not a TV, a Fox Movietone group [newsreel film crew] there, or it might

22:30 have been Cinesound [newsreel film company]. I'm not sure but I was in one of the exhibition fights.

And how did you go?

Oh, it was only an exhibition, not out to kill one another.

And what else, I mean during Ingleburn was it purely theory? I mean were you…?

Oh route marches, and you get out and do PE instruction and all physical jerks and loosen up

23:00 and you might go on a route march that day and it might be rifle drill for an hour and then they'd come off and do say a couple of hours on the Vickers gun and a couple of hours on something else, practice grenade throwing with a dummy grenade. I've got a dummy grenade there. It's the only thing I brought back from the war actually. It was a live one when I brought it back but I scooped it, took the Baratol [explosive]

23:30 out of it and never had a fuse in it anyhow. It's a doorstop.

And when you had to, when you joined 6th Div Cav and you had to relinquish your rank from the militia days, how was that for you? I mean you were obviously used to having some sort of authority, was it hard to lose that?

No, it didn't matter how high you were in the army, there was always somebody with more authority than

24:00 you and you were just used to taking orders from someone, so it didn't matter. I didn't, it didn't upset me one little bit because the NCOs [Non-commissioned Officers] that I was under in the 6th Div Cav were pretty decent blokes. As a matter of fact one of the corporals was a very good friend of mine.

Who was that?

Oh, Syd Park, he was a, he used to

24:30 ride in the Bathurst races before the war as a motorcyclist. He was very good on a bike. There were some wonderful bike riders, they were really good bike riders and I was taught to ride a bike by one Frank Rennex. He lives in Canberra now and I only spoke to him on the telephone over the weekend. We keep in contact with one another and he taught me how to ride.

And how easy or difficult was that for you to pick up

25:00 **that skill?**

A bit hard to pick up a heavy bike after you'd come off it so often but riding around in the Northern Territory, there was no roads. You were riding on tracks and a dry season when it's powdery underneath, the soil was all powdered, you'd hit a root that had been covered and off you'd go. You'd

just sshhhh straight off the bike. One day I was riding up to the, with Elwin

25:30 Bell, Butch Bell, he was a Middle East man, we were riding together to go from our camp up to Batchelor Airport and they were dropping some supplies out to our fellas and we had some mail to go out to Redcliffe, that's at the mouth of the Daly River at Anson Bay, as I mentioned. And we were riding up there and I got a series of punctures and this

26:00 mate, Butch, he's inclined to be very caustic and I think about the third puncture we were repairing and he was a bit sorry he'd brought me along I think. It wasn't my fault but it just happened. Further up the road, we saw a vehicle burning. The Japs had been down and strafed the road and got this utility and I said, "Now, you savage on me now? We could have been where that ute [utility] is."

26:30 So we realised that probably me getting the punctures saved us from dodging a few Zero [Japanese fighter aircraft] bullets.

What had happened to the men in the utility?

Don't know. They'd probably either got out of it before the, got down in the scrub before it started or they were killed and the bodies taken out, but it happened a good half hour or something before.

And what other skills or difficulties did you

27:00 **have with the motorbikes?**

Oh that was about the only thing. The more you rode of course, the better you became in the end and you spent more time in the saddle than on picking the bike up.

And what were there plans with the motorcycles? Was that merely for the defence?

Communication between the fighting troops, if the wireless broke down that was it, to carry messages from different, probably from the troop

27:30 into squadron headquarters or regimental headquarters. That was the function of them in action but just remember I was not in action then so I don't know but I guess that was it.

And were there any other training or exercises while you were up there, other than the motorbike?

Oh no, you did rifle shooting and again your physical training and then an order came out that you had to march 25 miles a week.

28:00 The troops up there were getting a bit sloppy I think, so we'd do these route marches. Get you fit, keep you fit, there was no alcohol there of course, none whatsoever in the Northern Territory when we were there. You could get what we called 'lolly water'. It was soft drink made at a works. I think it could have been at Adelaide River or it might have been in Darwin, and you could

28:30 buy lolly water but there was no beer, absolutely dry.

So you liked a drink by that stage?

Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah I didn't mind having a drink. One thing in my early days in the army, I think in Cowra camp, I was smoking and drinking with all the other big men. I thought it was big anyway.

You mentioned before Syd Parks, one of the

29:00 **corporals, can you tell us a bit more about him and some of the other officers there that you said?**

He wasn't an officer, he was a corporal and Frank O'Shea was the sergeant, and there was another corporal, 'Jesse' James we called him, but I don't know what his first name was. There were two corporals and Frank O'Shea but I had more to do with Syd Park than the other two. He was a great fellow, Syd. He lived at

29:30 Gladesville, which is just close by to Balmain and when we were home on leave, we would knock around together. He was much older than me but he didn't mind a younger bloke tagging around.

So how often did you get leave and what would you do with that?

In those days you got leave worked out about every 12 months and you'd get 28 days, so

30:00 when you were home you were home for a while. They only, I think I only experienced three of those leaves, 28-day leaves.

And how were things on the home front when you got back to Balmain, how was the family coping?

Well of course food was rationed but with your leave pass you also got some ration tickets to get food, butter, sugar, meat, but I had a lot of meals at home. It didn't

30:30 seem to be any shortage of food, but I don't know how rough it was on civilians quite frankly cause whenever I went home it was pretty much normal, not Depression normal, but after Depression normal.

And now that you'd had some experience under your belt, I mean you'd been in Darwin and there were raids, how were things with your father then? Were you able to sort of connect?

Oh we'd go out and have a beer

31:00 together. Oh yeah, I was good friends with my father, yeah we were pretty good mates. When you think he was probably 25 years older than me, it means nothing does it? Mum and Dad, I loved my mother very much. I spent a lot of time with her. When I was home on leave, I'd always take her out somewhere. I suppose two or three times a week I'd take my mother out.

31:30 **What sort of things would you do?**

Oh we'd go to the pictures in the city and have a meal at one of the restaurants. Nothing expensive but just a day out. Then if it was, in the summer time we'd go down to the holiday place at Harbord and stay there and get down on the beach and surf, which I loved doing.

32:00 **And was there much socialising with mates or with girlfriends or…?**

Oh yeah, mates. I didn't really have a girlfriend. I knew girls of course and I'd been out with girls but I didn't have any particular girlfriend. Some of my mates would have their steady girls or their wives and we'd go out. Like Syd Park had a steady girlfriend. He'd been married before but was divorced during the war

32:30 and Ollie her name was, that's the girlfriend and she'd come out a lot with us. And Frank Rennex, I went to their wedding, Frank and Edna, when they were married, things like that. Pretty much normal things that a civilian would do except you were in your uniform and you weren't allowed to get out of that uniform. If you got out of the uniform,

33:00 you'd be classified as a deserter. So at all times you wore your uniform.

And what did that mean in terms of the way that people treated you?

Oh a lot of them were interested where you'd been, particularly friends, like older friends, wanted to know where you'd been and what your experiences were. There was no antagonism. I know the Vietnam fellows [Vietnam War veterans] ran

33:30 into a bit of a problem but we never had that sort of problem, fortunately.

You said that if guys turned up in their civvies [civilian clothing], they'd be termed deserters, did you know of anyone or know of any examples?

No, no. I don't know of any.

And what was the mood like in Sydney during that period? Did you see a change after Japan?

I think after the Japanese submarines got into Sydney, it made them more aware there

34:00 was a war on. Probably scared the daylights out of them, I think it did.

That can't have been too far from where you were living?

Oh no, it was the other side of the Harbour Bridge. We were living on the west of the Harbour Bridge and this all happened up on the east side.

So can you tell us more about that transition from,

34:30 **you were on the motorbikes and there was the choice of joining the commando unit. Tell us the build up to that?**

Well I then got in with a different group of friends. There were none of my old Don R mates. I was in with the, what was called the Pioneer Section [He was in the Pioneer Section of 2/10th Commando Squadron] We were virtually the, specialised in handling explosives, booby traps, trained to do all that sort of thing.

35:00 And also erect the camps, dig the latrine trenches using explosives to blow then dig her out, erect the, out of natural timber around the place we'd erect mess huts, ablution blocks, latrines, just put a few posts up and a roof and put some hessian around it. Dig enough for about a dozen holes, they'd call them

35:30 12-holers or 20-holers, so did all that sort of work, construction work. I learnt a lot there because there were several of them in the Pioneer Section were trained carpenters, one of them Nelson Webster who came from Orange. He was later drowned in New Guinea; he was a lovely man. And Jim Monk from Camperdown, he only died the last 12 months

36:00 or so. They were trained as carpenters and showed me how to do things and as a result that most

woodworking around here, fencing and things, I do myself or I have done myself. I can't do it now.

So sorry, the Pioneer Section was the commandos?

Was in the commandos, yeah, and I was in that Pioneer Section but we were also trained to be specialists in

36:30 laying booby traps, trip wires, handling Murray switches, and things like that, anything explosive device and also using gelignite, gun cotton, stuff like that.

So this sounds like what differentiates the commandos?

Entirely different work but we were specialised within a specialist unit in that area.

When,

37:00 **sorry, just backtracking slightly, when was it that you were given that option of joining?**

It was just I'd say the end of November 1943. Several of them went to the paratroopers that I knew. Some of them joined the air force, went off and were trained in Canada. I can't think of anyone joining the navy.

37:30 Others went to, they were B Class, what you called B Class, they were not medically fit to stay in a combat unit and they were sent to other postings but in the end there was about 100 left. There wouldn't have been any more and from that 100 was the nucleus of two commando squadrons, the 2/9th and the 2/10th and they were built up to full strength by specialist commando blokes that had

38:00 been trained at Canungra. A lot of those fellows came out of infantry battalions and other commando units, strange as it may seem, came to us.

So where was the Pioneer Section training happening?

We were doing that in north Queensland around the Wondecla area. It was known as Wondecla. It's probably, if you know the

38:30 area at all, it's on the Atherton Tablelands, just out of Herberton. That would be the major town. It was a tin mining town. It was very isolated from anything and a good training area because there was a lot of jungle nearby and we did a few exercises on Mount Bartle Frere, which is the highest mountain in Queensland. That was to condition us for later

39:00 life in New Guinea.

So what motivated you to join that team?

Oh, I thought I might as well stay around. I had no desire to be trained as a pilot or go into any other unit. I was quite happy where I was. I knew a number of the men that were staying there.

And what news at this point had you heard of your brother and…?

Oh, he was killed before that.

39:30 I was at Kingaroy, Murgon, about three months earlier, two to three months earlier.

And did you have a chance to go home?

Yes, I was given seven days compassionate leave. The brigadier who authorised that leave, Brigadier Ferguson, at one time was the original commanding officer of 6th Div Cav and he had just lost a son up at Kokoda and he had another son that was still in the 6th Div Cav,

40:00 Derek Ferguson, and I think he was very sympathetic towards me. And I got seven days leave and went home to my mother and she was naturally very upset. My father was too.

It must have been hard for them letting you go back as well, I imagine it would be?

Oh yeah, they never, I can't recall them saying anything. Probably when they

40:30 were on their own they might have said a lot but they wouldn't say anything in front of me.

Tape 4

00:32 **So lets talk a bit more about what was going on at Woclenda?**

Wondecla.

Wondecla.

Wondecla.

Wondecla. You've discussed in brief the booby traps, can you tell us in more detail what actually went on there in Wondecla?

Well I guess apart from route marching and conditioning, getting fit,

01:00 like staying fit, because we were very fit, a very fit unit. And the fighting troops would be out practicing movements in the jungle, movements and things like that, exercises on Mount Bartle Frere and one exercise went on for about three weeks. We were digging defensive positions and taking up ambush positions

01:30 and things like that. As the Pioneer Section, we would be laying out booby traps and doing things of that nature and working in conjunction with the troops. We also dug the latrines for when they came back out of the exercise. That was very humorous. We had a hygiene corporal who was in charge of the toilets and his name was Athol Boyle and Athol was a bit of a character.

02:00 One of the fellows had brought some wine back from the hotel at Goondi, which is just out of Innisfail, and he got Athol on the wine, and of course Athol got us to construct a toilet, a latrine area, and that was all done and he got that full he couldn't direct the troops to where it was. And we all had convenient memories. We couldn't remember where it was either.

02:30 I think he became a trooper again after that. I'm not too sure.

What were relationships like between your section and the infantrymen?

Oh we knew them all very well, the fellows. Every pay night when we were at Wondecla, you asked us what went on, pay night was the night. That's when the two up [Australian gambling game betting on the fall of coins] games would be on and the dice on the tables and

03:00 the beer would be on. That was also beer night and you made your own drinking vessel out of a beer bottle. It was called a Lady Blamey. You've probably heard of Lady Blamey? Everyone had their own Lady Blameys and they'd fill it up for a shilling and that was a fair bit of beer for a shilling. You didn't need too many of them either, I might add, or you'd be rip-roaring drunk. You'd sit around and talk and they were good nights, very relaxed.

03:30 Beer night was good. A few brawls would take place. A few fellows couldn't hold their grog or try and take it out on a person that upset them in between paydays but that happens. In that stage, there was nearly 1,000 men in our unit, so you can bet your life there's a lot of scores that wanted to be settled up on beer night.

Can you think of any specific examples or disputes that?

04:00 Oh, I can remember we had a very good footballer by the name of Norm Le Brun. He played for Collingwood and Richmond and Essendon. He was known as a nomad. He was written up recently in that Fallen Heroes book and Norm was a pretty solid, capable

04:30 bloke and someone picked him and they picked the wrong one and Norm soon let them know what went on in the world. That was one particular night. Whenever they fought it was always a fair fight, there was no kicking or that sort of nonsense, it was straight out fists.

What about you with your boxing background?

Kept right out of it. I never got into a brawl all the time I was in the army but I used to box

05:00 up there. We had a boxing troop, run by John Byrne, an officer, who's a good friend of mine. Again I was speaking with him only this weekend, he lives in Queensland. John and I have been very good friends and we'd box and train together and there was a lot of others, Jim Stacey, there was a lot of them there. Roy Prior, he died last year, Parks he was a good boxer. We had some very good fighters in the unit and we'd go into

05:30 the brigade tournaments and stuff like that representing the unit, the regiment.

And how did, any particular memories of those tournaments?

Oh yes, I'd train up and have a few fights and I fought also when we got up to New Guinea. Had a couple up there but I never got into brawls. I knew enough from

06:00 my younger days in Balmain that you'd keep away from brawls.

Was there an American presence at that stage?

Up at New Guinea? Yeah, yeah.

But in Queensland?

No, no, not in that. There were the three divisions, 6th, 9th and 7th Divisions were all on the Tablelands [Atherton Tablelands] in those days. There were some good football games, we had some terrific games to watch, rugby matches. I played in a few rugby games.

06:30 There was a theatre, they had a big theatre near the end of the 16th Brigade area, a huge hut. It's still there. They'd take about five or six hundred people and you could go up to the theatre, it was something.

You mentioned that three-week exercise on manoeuvre on Mt Bartle Frere, could you just tell us in a little more detail what you would be

07:00 **specifically be doing in such an exercise.**

Well yes, we'd be laying out booby traps on paths that the, not live booby traps I might add, just rattle and tins, along paths that the scouts would be coming along on their training exercise to make them aware of booby traps.

So sorry, what were the…?

Live explosives, we'd throw

07:30 quarter plugs of gelignite near them, gelly, just throw it to get them used to the bang and see what their reaction was.

So you were laying these mocked up booby traps which you were just saying was wire and cans?

Yes, trip wire.

Trip wire but you were also learning how to set up the real McCoy I guess?

Oh yes, we had proper training on the Murray switches. They were a device that the English had and

08:00 were a very good trap. You could have them operating, firing off an explosive by pressure, by tension. You'd set them up in different ways and they would work.

Can you explain that to us? I mean it's quite interesting to hear the details of how those things worked.

It's a bit hard to explain it. It's only a small little mechanical device but you could pre-set it how you wanted it. If you wanted it to be

08:30 tension well you'd have a trip wire attached to it so that anything that brought that tension it would fire, that would then supply the fuse to the explosive.

And what other devices or sort of techniques were you sort of learning?

Oh, we had phosphorus grenades. You didn't hit them with a, you didn't strike them with a striker cap like you did with a normal

09:00 grenade. They were on a, they were a bakelite, an early type of plastic and they had like a streamer with a weight attached to the end of it and when the weight made the final pull that's when it would explode and of course, you'd get plenty of fire with it. They were a pretty nasty piece of work, a phosphorus

09:30 grenade, because the phosphorus would spread everywhere and if you got any into your skin you had to get water into it to stop the burn. We never used them in the Pioneer unit, used them in exercises.

Was there anything else that you were training on there?

Probably I'll think of a hundred things when you go.

Take your time.

10:00 The main thing was keeping fit I suppose. Practicing your skills, learning new skills, shooting, firing, actual firing.

So can you describe the breakdown of the battalion? There was your Pioneer Section, is there a commando unit as such. I mean how does that?

No, the

10:30 section was only part of the squadron. First of all there's a regimental structure where there's three squadrons, well, I'll just pull apart one squadron. In one squadron there is three fighting troops, A, B and C they were known as and then there was Headquarters Squadron and in Headquarter Squadron we had a lot of people like Pioneer Section and wireless operators,

11:00 people like that, intelligence, fellas from intelligence, so you had virtually all these support people grouped together as squadron headquarters and we were part of squadron headquarters. We had a nasty accident up on the Atherton Tablelands. We were looking at captured Japanese equipment

11:30 and an explosive device was started, was dropped, I understand. I didn't see it happen but it was dropped and there was some talk of it being a grenade but it wasn't a grenade, I'm sure it was a land mine and three fellows were killed outright and about 60-odd were wounded and they had to race them

off to hospital at Rocky Creek. I can remember being knocked down from the explosion

12:00 and as I sat down on the ground I don't know whether, it was probably the first time I'd ever experienced trauma. If you look at a film, you see everything in slow motion, that's exactly how it was and when I noticed it on films I thought, "Now that's the feeling I had up at Wondecla when the Japanese equipment went up." That was a nasty experience there.

12:30 **What were the immediate repercussions there for yourself and?**

Oh we had to try and get as many fellows as possible up to the RAP where we had a doctor and incidentally were part of squadron headquarters, the doctor and the medical staff, those that could be taken up to get their wounds looked at to see if it was dangerous. They got onto the field ambulance. We had ambulances running in and conveying

13:00 fellows to the hospital at Rocky Creek, which was some miles away at Atherton. And many of those fellows didn't come back to the unit. They were that badly wounded, they didn't come back. One of them I still have contact with, in Queensland, Joe De Lange. He had half his foot blown off and he's had trouble with his feet ever since.

Did you sustain any injury there?

No, just concussion with the

13:30 blast and as soon as I realised what had happened I joined the others to try and see what assistance we could give. Every soldier had a field dressing, you carried it as part of your kit and any bleeding, I remember wrapping one bloke up to try and stop some bleeding before the medical could get to him.

So they were men from the Pioneer Section?

14:00 Oh no, it was the whole squadron. We were inspecting captured Japanese equipment. They had a woodpecker [Japanese 7.7mm heavy machine gun] there, light machine guns, rifles, grenades, everything there and they had it out on two big trestle tables and I think some bloke might have picked it up and it was dropped. Probably the weight of it might have given him a shock and he dropped it.

14:30 This huge explosion but it was pretty nasty. That was one of the things that affected our squadron. We lost so many men there and then we lost another lot later on in New Guinea in a drowning, we were caught in a river flood. We lost a lot of people there too. So we were always under strength.

So other than just losing men, what effect did it have on morale

15:00 **and the spirit there?**

I don't think it affected us in any way like that. I often think of it, even now. Like it will come back, like many other things come back, but it's not of any particular importance.

So how long was it before the squadron was able to sort of regroup after that?

Well, almost within that day, and

15:30 some of them came back to the unit, one of them came back as sergeant, our sergeant. He lost a testicle. His name was Billy Brown and he came from Western Australia. Bill was one of the boys; you could have a joke with him. We christened him 'Billy One Ball' and he went off mad at us. He said, "You young blokes, I'm better with one than you are with two."

16:00 So he must have tried himself out in Cairns before he came up to New Guinea. He was a good bloke. He got killed.

And what else was happening at that time?

Oh, you played football. You got a sports day a week and church parade every Sunday.

16:30 I wasn't a religious bloke and they'd fall out the Roman Catholics and the Non-Conformists and Joe Byrne, to my knowledge, was the only Catholic officer we had. And Joe would march us off and they'd all get kitchen fatigue, all the others. They'd have to go and peel spuds for the Sunday dinner and Joe and I would go down and practice boxing. We'd have a

17:00 spar, good officer Joe. We were friends for life.

So how long were you there all up, just sort of training there?

Oh, 10 months. We got leave from there before we went to New Guinea, a 24-day leave.

So at this point what did you know of what lay ahead?

17:30 We knew we were going into action but we didn't know where. Even after we got on the ship we didn't know where we were going. We weren't told. We loaded up at, where was it? Townsville. The ship was the Katoomba. It was an old coal burner from World War I. It would have been a troop ship in World War I and

18:00 they put about 1,000 or 1,200 fellows onboard and when we got to Milne Bay it was then we were told we were going to Aitape. Nobody had any idea where we were going till we got there, except the upper echelon of officers would have known of course.

What was your rank by this point?

Trooper, the same rank as when I joined and that's what I finished up too, trooper.

Now what was camaraderie like with the men in your section?

18:30 Uh?

With the men in your section, what was the camaraderie like there?

In the Pioneer Section, wonderful. I've got a photo there of the Pioneers at the tent. There weren't many of us; there were only about eight or nine. No, we were all pretty good pals but when we got to New Guinea, Jim Monk and myself who was in the Pioneers, we went to B Troop, as specialists in the explosives, but didn't last long because it wasn't

19:00 long before they knew everything that we did and then I became a Number Two on a Bren gun and when the Bren gunner was killed and I became Number One on the Bren gun.

So during training with the Pioneer section, were you doing sort of specialised roles? Or was everyone sort of capable of doing all the required tasks?

Yeah, all capable of doing everything. No, whatever one could do the whole lot could do.

19:30 **And do you remember when news came of you having to embark?**

We were told to get ready and we were pulling out of camp and right at that time, that's when I got my NX number. I was called up to the orderly room and they said, "Your number is so and so." It had taken about two years to get to me. Then also I'd been transferred, I was supposed to have been transferred to the AIB [Allied Intelligence Bureau], which is the

20:00 Allied Intelligence Bureau, but I knocked back that transfer and said, "No, I won't take it," because if I'd have taken the transfer the fellows I'd been training with would have thought that I was dingoing it, skipping out of going into action. AIB went into action but I didn't know what they did at that stage. All I knew was a friend of my father's was a colonel in it and I think he, my father might

20:30 have been at him to get his son under his wing. I don't know.

No evidence of it?

Never inquired. It was out of the blue anyway. I just said, "No, I won't accept the transfer," and we went down to…

How much of a fight would you have to put up in that instance?

None, Never worried too much about it. It wasn't a big deal to transfer.

21:00 If you wanted a transfer to be a civilian that was a different matter. So we went down to the siding at Wondecla, they had a loading siding, and loaded onto the trains and taken down to, where was it? Innisfail. We had a meal at Innisfail and then from there down to

21:30 Townsville to load onto the Katoomba, which had caught fire, and the wharfies [wharf labourers] refused to unload it because of the munitions and everything on board and we had to unload the ship and then reload it.

Was that as treacherous a task as the wharfies?

No, no. Ammunitions only dangerous when it's misused.

22:00 Like carrying cases of ammunition and stuff, it's not dangerous. So we finally left, probably about a week later than what was intended, arrived at Aitape. Would have been maybe four or five days, I don't know. Could have been that long, four days anyhow.

Do you remember much of

22:30 **voyage?**

Yes, I had diarrhoea the whole way. The water upset me I suppose, might have had some foul water onboard, I don't know. I had diarrhoea, so I remember that. Down the bilges of the ship, where the toilets, latrine was, it stunk to high heavens and they had

23:00 water pumping through like on a channel to go out and you had to straddle over the thing. I got a lot of, became very proficient at having diarrhoea, so I knew all about that.

Were the nerves starting to come into action?

No, no nerves, no, not really.

23:30 When we got to Milne Bay, it was a stinking night and we were held off there and we didn't get off the ship. The stench from Milne Bay was enough to turn your stomach anyhow. Must have been a foul place to have been fighting.

That was just what, the stench of the…?

No, the rotten jungle undergrowth smelt. You got, wherever you went you got it, but that was the first time I'd experienced it and

24:00 probably many of the others. It hit you all of a sudden. You thought, "This would be a great place to be."

How prepared do you think everyone was?

To fight?

Yeah.

Pretty right, they were churned up. They'd had enough of training camps. Oh no, morale was very high.

24:30 **And at what point did you know you were going to Aitape? Was that?**

I think that was after we pulled out of Milne Bay, we were told we were going there. The Americans had been there for I think four or five months. They'd had one big battle just prior to us getting there a month before on the Drinumor River and they thought the back of the Japanese defence had broken, they'd broken it but

25:00 they'd withdrawn. Apart from having a few outposts, like small groups of soldiers out, they were enjoying life in a pretty sound base camp. That's how they had Aitape and there were some RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] fellows there. We had to come ashore by barges, unload at sea, and there was a heavy swell [high waves] going. It's a wonder somebody didn't go in the water and drown, particularly loaded up with all your gear.

25:30 Came down this rope ladder into barges and finally got ashore at Aitape and moved to a filthy camp area. We were only there for a couple of days, moved out of that and got somewhere better. And the RAAF fellows were terrific. They heard there were Australians landing and they went around in a ute, I'll never forget, and they must have got contributions of cartons of American cigarettes and brought

26:00 them to us and they were throwing them out from the ute, "Have some cigarettes." Well then a fellow came around and called, "Is there anyone here from Balmain?" Somebody heard it and they said, "Yeah, Snowy Johnston's from Balmain." "Snowy Johnston, don't know him," and when he came down to say he was from Balmain, it was a fellow I went to school with. I was known there as 'Monty', he didn't know me as 'Snowy'. Everyone had a nickname.

26:30 So Jack De Belin his name was. He came from a very famous sporting family in Balmain. His eldest brother, Fred, played with the Kangaroos [the Australian Rugby League team]. He was an Australian representative rugby league player. He would have been in the air force. He was in the air force over in the UK and his older brother Bill was a boxer of some renown. He was Australian amateur welterweight champion and Jack was pretty good too.

27:00 And Jack was a good boxer and he came around and, "Oh, don't eat this stuff they've given you here. Come around to our mess." So he took me around to where they ate, it was only a couple of hundred yards away, terrific food. The army never ate like that and he said, "How did you enjoy it?" I said, "I feel a bit guilty cause my mates are still eating that." He said, "We can sneak them two or three of them in. Better not bring any more."

27:30 So snuck a few more of us in.

So what were they eating that you couldn't get your hands on?

He was in the air force. I think he was in the ground crew. There were three Australian Beaufort squadrons there, the 100, the 7 and 8 and they were all Beaufort bombers, at Tadji airstrip, which was just near where we were camped.

Were you basically taking over the American camp?

Role, yeah. We then went

28:00 down, oh within a few days, went down to where their forward outpost was. That's at a place called Badiang, our squadron. 9 Squadron [2/9th Commando Squadron] went to another American camp, moving more towards Landi, it was west. We were travelling east towards Wewak. From Badiang, we established a

28:30 camp and patrolled right down to the Danop River. Danop and Drinumor were the rivers. Killed a few Japs along the way, cleaned a few out and then the infantry relieved us. We were there for about six or eight weeks I suppose and then back into Aitape for Christmas and they put on a very good meal.

29:00 **So did you have much, in terms of meeting the Americans, were there many encounters or was it?**

Oh no, got on well with the Americans. The transport fellows were mainly American Negroes. I don't think you're allowed to call them Negroes these days but that's how we knew them and they were pretty decent blokes. They'd drive the ducks [DUKWS amphibious landing craft] - the amphibian vehicle that could go on the water, and that was our transport.

29:30 They transported us down to Badiang, there was no road, so we had to, wherever they came to a river that was flooding or running the ducks would then go out to sea, come in again and off they'd go. They knew the route. They had their own American outposts down there. No, the Americans were no problem, well no problem to us and we were no problem to them.

So how long was it before

30:00 **you finally got into action?**

It was then, virtually within a few days of getting to Badiang, sent out patrols.

So was that inland or was it one of those?

Along the coast, along the coast. Inland was our 2/7th. We sent a patrol up to a place called Tong. The natives had said that Tong was being evacuated by the Japanese, so they sent a patrol

30:30 up of a few of our fellas and some Americans and they found out the Japanese were not vacating, they were actually building up in strength there, not getting out. So they set up an ambush and killed about nine of them. This mate of mine, Kevin Hobson, cleaned up nine with a Bren and they hightailed it out of it soon after. The ambush had sprung them because there were so many Japs there. It was only a small patrol.

31:00 **Can you remember the build up to your first operation? How you were briefed and prepared for that and then the actual operation itself, the patrol?**

Yeah, you didn't know a great deal. I don't think a great deal of information come to you. They'd just say, "You're patrolling around this certain area," and off you'd go.

Can you sort of walk us through

31:30 **maybe that first one if that comes to mind or…?**

It was a bit of a disaster really. We had two patrols shot up one another. Fortunately nobody was injured but they did like a pincer movement without knowing they were heading into a point where they were going to make contact with each other. So fortunately

32:00 they realised by the language being thrown around that they were Aussies they were fighting, so that was a disaster.

You were one of those involved?

I personally was not, no. I know the officers in charge; a couple of them got sent home. They were not suited.

So at this point you were a machine gunner?

No, I was still with the Pioneers but

32:30 after we came back from Badiang I then went into 4 Section, one of the fighting sections. There's a photo over there of 4 Section and from there, then we went to the, just prior to going up to the Torricelli Mountains, after Christmas, Kevin Hobson, the fella that shot the Japs up at Tong, he was an ex-

33:00 motorcyclist and he said to me he wanted a Number Two on the gun and would I be his Number Two. You could do things like that within the troops shift them around. If anyone wanted to move within that there was no arguments from the officers, they just let you do it. Quite often it would happen and then they'd tell the officer later. Oh yes, it was pretty normal and so

33:30 I went as his Number Two.

So can you recall your first experiences with the Pioneer Section itself, your first patrol?

Well we were part of that big patrol but we were not involved in the two making contact. We got down to the Danop River and we'd killed a few Japanese near the river and that night they had a mountain gun up there and they started to shell our position,

34:00 so we moved back out of it, moved back that night, got back to Labuain village, we were at Suain and we went back to Labuain.

And how do you think the section dealt with that first bit of action?

Oh I'd say they did alright in the end. I don't think anyone was upset about it. No one was complaining,

I don't think, particularly when we pulled back from being shelled,

34:30 because we were on the beach and you couldn't dig in the sand. It wasn't good for you digging a weapon pit so it was better to move back out of it before anyone got hurt. So that was the first bit of enemy action that I'd struck was the shellfire from the mountain gun.

And you said that you encountered

35:00 **some Japanese soldiers there and they'd, some of them had been taken out?**

Quite a few of them had been killed but I wasn't any part of that because I wasn't attached to a fighting troop. Oh, we lost our first casualties there incidentally. Norm Le Brunne, the fella I was speaking about who was the good footballer from Victoria, he was killed, and Reg Baxter was badly wounded but he came back to the unit,

35:30 sometime later.

And with the Pioneer Section you were just basically doing what you'd been trained to do, I take it?

That's right, but then we were broken up. Two of us were sent into B Troop, Jim Monk and myself.

And how seamless was that transition from your training experiences into combat? Did it all gel or…?

Yeah, yeah, didn't have any problems, after all you're trained, you're a trained soldier.

36:00 Just because you had specialist training didn't mean to say that you neglected basic training.

But did you encounter problems, which perhaps were unexpected, and find that you had to use sort of your ingenuity or resourcefulness to fix things?

Well you had to acquire new skills and one of them was to be able to move without creating a lot of noise

36:30 and also to get your bearings in case you were ambushed and had to know where your fellas were. Didn't want to shoot up your own blokes. Had to be very aware of one another when you were on patrol. Had what they called a scout section, generally a corporal and two or three others. They'd get out in front and then the support section would come

37:00 behind that was the Bren gunner, and in case they got into trouble, so the Bren gunner would get up and give a bit of supporting fire and you had riflemen and the officer and then a reserve scout section to relieve the first scout section. They didn't leave a scout out long. A forward scout would alternate between themselves and then after a while they'd bring another scout group up to relieve the one that was there

37:30 in the first place. That worked about like that.

So how long were you with the Pioneer Section before you moved to?

Oh once we got to New Guinea, about three weeks.

Right. Now with the Pioneer Section, it was only three weeks, but how did your group, how did your section fit in with what you've just been discussing?

Oh we were attached to squadron headquarters,

38:00 we were there. And when squadron headquarters were requiring guards and that sort of thing we'd provide the defence for them, so the other troops would be out in the perimeter but we'd also be involved in the defence.

So just recap [recapitulate] that time when you were asked to come and be the second?

Kevin Hobson

38:30 asked me. No, it was just we knew one another, he was an original with the cavalry and had served in the Middle East and quite an experienced soldier and he was as rough as you could get them but he could be a gentleman if he had to be. He had that exterior of a bushie and he was a bushie and a great bloke. And he said to me, "I need a Number Two on the gun, will you be my Number Two?"

39:00 I said, "Yeah, alright."

So what would have happened to the Pioneer Section with you gone?

Oh they'd just broke up, they went to different troops.

That was because as you were saying the other men had left?

They had nothing to contribute so they just went into the other troops.

Now what was the name of that squadron or that troop you were with?

B Troop.

That was B Troop?

39:30 They had a shuffle round of officers after the kafuffle with the patrols nearly shooting each other up and Peter Perkins, was one of, he was 5 Section leader, section leader, Lieutenant, original cavalryman, good man. He became OC of the troop and Kevin Hobson and I were virtually his guard. Wherever he went, we had to go with him

40:00 to protect him with the troop headquarters machine gun. Every section, there were three sections, each of them had a machine gun, like a Bren gun, and Peter was the, had the exclusive use of us and we worked a lot with him and got to admire him as a wonderful bloke, good soldier and he wasn't

40:30 over friendly with the men but you knew where you stood with him. Pretty good. Prior to that, I'd been in 4 Section with Ken Land. He was the lieutenant there. He was a similar type to Peter and, as a matter of fact, Marge and I were godparents to his eldest son. He died not so many years ago and people like that very

41:00 very friendly. You'd think there's a division between officers and men but not in our unit. They were very much altogether, good mates.

Tape 5

00:35 **We're going to record and will we start at Badiang? We've got you to Badiang.**

Okay, well at Badiang we patrolled up to the Labuain and Suain on the Danop River and then went inland a bit there to the junction of the Danop River and cleared out little pockets of Japanese in that area.

01:00 An interesting thing that happened when we were at Badiang River was some Sikh Indians came into our camp, like we let them through, the perimeter guards knew they weren't Japanese, they were too tall and they had turbans on their heads. I think there were five or six of them and they knew there were Australians in the area, so they got away from the Japanese. How they happened to be there, they were taken POW [Prisoner Of War] in Malaya

01:30 and brought out as prisoners of war to work in the northern New Guinea area, similar to what our fellows were sent up to the Thai border to work on the Burmese Railway. So I understand there were 3,000 of them and I'm not sure of the figures but I think it could have three or four or five of them came in. I did see them but right now I can't remember

02:00 and after the war they were flown from, we gave them something to eat but I, they couldn't eat beef being Hindus. They weren't allowed meat so we gave them some beef tea but didn't tell them what it was, so that helped them to eat and we gave them other food as well and then they were taken by duck, that's the American duck back up to Aitape.

02:30 After the war those POWs, the Sikhs, were flown to Rabaul to attend a war crimes tribunal session and the aircraft that they were on crash landed and they were all killed, so of the 3,000 or so Sikhs that were taken to northern New Guinea, not one of them returned home. Another incident that happened there.

03:00 **Sorry, can we just recap on that a little bit, Keith. Perhaps get a bit more detail about that story. So how did they, the day that they arrived in your camp at Badiang, what did they just walk in out of the bush?**

Well they came in out of the bush but they made a lot of noise as they were coming in, so that our sentries, the fellas operating the perimeter fence didn't fire on them and unfortunately, well, they picked on during the daytime and fortunately not during the night, otherwise they would have been

03:30 shot. But the fellas on guard could see they were not Japanese. They were very tall men and of course they had beards as Sikhs do not cut their hair at all. They had a beard and also they had the remnants of turbans around their head, so they allowed them to pass into the line and they could speak English and explained that they had been taken prisoner in Malaya

04:00 and they had escaped from the Japanese knowing there were Australian soldiers in the area.

Had you had any experience with Indian troops before?

First time I'd even seen an Indian I think, except for the ones that were on the boats when I was a boy, the P & O liners, they had what we called 'lascars' [Indian seamen] crewing the liners, but they were the only Sikh soldiers I'd ever, or Indian soldiers I'd ever seen.

And how long had they spent in the POW camps before they escaped?

04:30 I think they were brought out, probably when the Japanese landed in northern New Guinea. They would have brought them out to do manual labour. Some of the labour could have been round Wewak itself, up on the hill behind Wewak, on Mission Hill. There were anti-aircraft emplacements in concrete and there was a concrete road up to there. I've seen it and

05:00 they were probably used on that type of construction work, heavy construction work. I'm only presuming.

So how long did they spend with you before they moved onto Aitape?

Oh two or three days, we just fed them what we, we weren't overburdened with rations so we couldn't give them too much to eat, like we never carried much in the way of rations.

Okay and what was the other incident you wanted to talk about?

05:30 Oh yes, three Japanese senior NCOs, I think they'd be the equivalent of our warrant officer rank, surrendered to us. It was unusual for the Japanese to surrender. One of them could speak English and he said that they were sick of it all and they wanted to get back, like come back into civilization, rather than living off the land in hostile country, so

06:00 we guarded them overnight. I was on a guard that kept an eye on them during the night. You wouldn't let them move, kept them well away from each other. They weren't allowed to talk because we didn't know whether they'd come in to spy out what we were doing and how many of us there were, so we had to keep them separated. If they started to talk, you told them not to talk, "Shut up." If they wanted to urinate, say, "Piss, piss,"

06:30 so one at a time we'd go out with a guard with an Owen gun on his back in case he tried to bolt. They didn't, they didn't try anything. They did what we told them to do. The next day they also went on a duck, a signal would have gone through to headquarters at Aitape that we had three Japanese prisoners. And naturally they wanted to interrogate prisoners to find out what was going on, cause the Americans hadn't had much contact with them since

07:00 the battle of the Drinumor River, which was two or three months earlier.

That's interesting too what you were saying earlier about that the Drinumor River and no contact with the Japanese and then the Australians, your units come in. What was the Americans' reaction to you coming in?

They thought we were idiots. We should have left the Japanese alone and not stir them up. But

07:30 I heard one of the fellas say, "We came up here to kill the bastards. We're not up here to sit on one side of the fence."

There were many, many thousand Japanese there.

Yes, they outnumbered us. At the time, we were told there were 18,000 Japanese. I think at the end of the war about 24,000 came in and we probably killed just as many, so they outnumbered us greatly.

So just on the subject of POWs,

08:00 **prisoners of war, Japanese prisoners of war, did you take prisoners of war?**

No, we were asked to take prisoners but we wouldn't because we had some of our men cannibalised and some of our blokes had been killed and we couldn't get the bodies out. They'd been cannibalised so the men just said, "No prisoners." We just said, "We're not taking any prisoners," and apart from that we wouldn't have been able to handle any prisoners because of the too

08:30 few of us in a group. Our troop was down from a normal strength of about 72 I think. We were down to the low thirties. We just didn't have the men to guard them so this was at the stage when we were asked to take prisoners. That was a couple of months later.

I know it's not a pleasant subject and it's entirely up to you if you don't want to

09:00 **say anything, it's fine but just on the subject of seeing your mates, your dead mates being cannibalised?**

Well, they weren't my best mates but some of the men had been cannibalised and when the news got around we just said, "We don't take prisoners."

So had you seen evidence of this?

09:30 Cannibalism? Yes. When we got down to, when we were operating around the Danop River area, killed a couple of Japanese there and both of them had human flesh tied up in, around a banana leaf in their gear. You'd go through their gear to see what they had. Generally had lots of watches.

Oh, that was the evidence for it?

10:00 Oh yes, not only that, didn't happen in our particular squadron but it happened in one of our sister

squadrons, they got into about four of the fellas that had been killed and just stripped flesh from them.

Okay, so let's now talk about the patrols that you were involved in from Badiang.

10:30 **You were in reconnaissance patrols and fighter patrols, is that correct?**

Well yes, there was reconnaissance patrols and there's lots of different patrols. There's clearing patrols where you clear your perimeter and areas the next morning before you send anyone out. First thing you do is send two or three men around in the general area to clear the area, to make sure there's no enemy around, there's no evidence of any of them being there.

11:00 And then they'll send out a reconnaissance patrol, which is they just carry ammunition and they're not heavily armed, hoping they'll see something but in a position to fight if they have to, but a fighting patrol's a different matter. You're out on one purpose only and that is to kill enemy.

Right, so how is a fighting patrol different to like an infantry?

11:30 Well you have more, they're a bit different to the infantry because we moved in smaller units and every unit was independent of each other. Perhaps I'm confusing you but in a commando squadron there were three troops and to every troop there were three sections. We might send out a fighting patrol comprising two sections from one troop,

12:00 so it's more men involved and they carry more ammunition, more grenades. They're there to do as much damage as they can on a fighting patrol. We're different to the infantry in that we don't carry all our gear on our back and move into a place and consolidate a position, like taking territory. We didn't do that. We would scout around and just do damage. Set up temporary

12:30 bases and operate out of that base then after we'd clear an area we'd vacate that particular base and move onto somewhere else.

So a section would set up a base or two sections if they were on a fighting patrol?

A troop would set up a base.

A troop would set up a base somewhere in the bush in the area where?

Generally in a village, they would select a village that could be defended reasonably well by the small number of men that were left in there.

13:00 **So going into villages, what was your reception like when you'd go to a village to set up a base?**

The natives would generally get to hell out of it because they knew once the soldiers arrived there was going to be a bit of action, so they'd keep well out. Later on at Milak they were wonderful there, the natives, we got terrific support from them.

Where would they go to, do you know?

Oh just go into the bush. We'd never find them. They knew we weren't looking for

13:30 them and they just kept out of the road because they knew there'd be a lot of bullets flying around. It's common sense to get away from it.

Did they assist you in any way? Were any of the elders involved in assisting you?

Oh they assisted us a lot. They provided scouts for us, like help us, particularly going through areas where we were not familiar with the area and they'd help us by locating tracks and

14:00 quite often they'd come on a patrol with you. And on one occasion attacking one village, we had two young lads carrying the two-inch mortar bombs for us, and they wanted to be part of the action. I think they were about 14 or something and years later some of our men went up to, I among

14:30 them, went back to Milak and one of those little boys was the headman of the village and the other one was the government appointed chief and they recognised us, threw their arms around us. Oh, they were terrific. I've got photos of them.

That must have been amazing to make that contact?

Oh yeah, they were good young blokes.

So if you used local people as scouts to assist you, did they have guns, did they have weapons?

No, we never gave them weapons.

15:00 They might have had Japanese stuff but they might have picked up a Japanese rifle but we didn't arm them.

Did you feel a responsibility to protect them?

Uh?

Did you feel a responsibility to protect them?

Oh yes and also feed them, cause they were starved for food too. The Japanese were stripping their gardens

15:30 where they were growing their food from and eating their pigs and whatnot. They were without food so we used to feed them.

Did you rely on them for food as well, for fresh food?

No, no, we knew they needed their food.

Okay, so now

16:00 **as a commando and you're going into the bush on patrol, what would your kit be, what supplies and what would you take with you?**

Well as I say on a fighting patrol we'd generally carry, well it depends on who you were. Well, when I was a Bren gunner, when I was the number one on the gun, I'd carry eight magazines plus a magazine on the Bren gun, so eight spares that were fully loaded and I'd throw a couple of bandoliers around to

16:30 carry extra ammunition. They carried, a bandolier I think carried a hundred rounds so it was 200 rounds there and the grenades and an entrenching tool.

What's an entrenching tool?

Oh, a short shovel to dig a hole that you needed very much and for protection mainly, an entrenching tool

17:00 and what else? Oh food, a bit of food in case you were out for a few days, a couple of tins of bully beef and biscuits.

That's a lot of weight?

A lot of weight, I used to carry probably as much as I weighed. We had other people of course. We had

17:30 what they called a rifle bomber. That's a fellow that can convert a rifle into a grenade thrower and throw it about a hundred yards. You couldn't throw them by hand probably any more than 30. That would be as far as you could throw a grenade. We'll he'd carry extra grenades and he'd have seven second fuses. We'd work to a shorter fuse with a hand-operated grenade

18:00 but he'd carry probably equally as much ammunition. Every spare body carried ammunition, more than you needed.

Do you remember how the conversion worked, converting the rifle into a grenade thrower?

Oh yeah.

Can you describe that?

Yeah, there was a discharger cup that clamped onto the end of the rifle. At the end of the rifle there was a couple of,

18:30 what do they call it, one each side there was a gap in the steel that allowed the clamps to go on. They'd just clamp the discharger cup down, turn the rifle around the other way and he'd put his knee on the rifle to support it at the angle he wanted. He had to gauge the angle

19:00 to lay the rifle to get the, to achieve the elevation to get the distance, he had to work on that. Then it was a blank cartridge used to fire to start the grenade off. That would give it enough propulsion to clear the discharger cup, when it would spring open like an ordinary grenade when you let it go. Then for seven seconds while that grenade was in the air, nothing happened

19:30 but as soon as seven seconds are up, it exploded and if it exploded above ground, that was great because there was better dispersal of fragmentation.

So it was actually a bullet that was propelling it?

Yeah, a blank cartridge. We didn't get blank cartridges so we had to take out the projectile from an ordinary 303 bullet, leave the cordite in there and then we'd plug

20:00 it up with soap and put that in and that propelled it up the shute to get the grenade out of the discharger cup. It was a very effective piece of equipment. We didn't have heavy mortars, we only carried one two-inch mortar for the whole troop, so the rifle bomber supplemented

20:30 the shrapnel fire you could get from a mortar.

Was that army issue?

Oh yeah.

He hadn't designed it himself?

No, we didn't design it.

And what was your uniform like? What did you wear? What sort of clothing did you need?

Oh, it was just drill greens they called them 'jungle greens'. They used to have khaki

21:00 that they just re-dyed to green to camouflage you in the jungle. The early soldiers up in New Guinea had khaki and the uniforms, of course, stood out in the jungle, so you had the long slacks. You wouldn't wear shorts because of the mosquitoes, you had to keep mosquitoes away from your body. And you had gaiters, which we had. We were equipped with generally American gaiters. They came right up and gave you leg

21:30 clearance when you'd go through rivers. They were pretty good and shirt, long-sleeved shirt, that was your uniform and the hat. Nobody wore a steel helmet. Some of them wore berets, like our dress uniform included a beret and a few of them wore berets but I never. I just wore an ordinary

22:00 slouch hat turned down because it gave you some protection from the rain because it rained most of the time.

So if we perhaps get into some detail about the operations that you were involved in, setting out from Badiang?

Well we

22:30 were on our way up to the Torricelli Mountains and we had to follow a jungle track up the Danop River till we came to a feature called 'the Hump'. It was a 3,000-feet high feature but before reaching there we set up a squadron headquarters and B Troop, we set up a position on the fork of the Danop

23:00 and Drinumor Rivers, on a little island. One side of the Danop River there was the 2/2nd Field Artillery, artillery unit, and on the other side, unbeknown to us, there was a Japanese raiding party come down to try and knock out the guns of the 2/2nd. But the night we arrived there was torrential rain. There was a flash flood. Many of them were washed out to sea,

23:30 many of the blokes were washed out to sea. Some bodies were not recovered. There were I think four, four actually drowned and one missing. They never got him. He was in our section. We knew him as Homer, Homer Newman, came from Sydney. His body was never recovered. Nelson Webster, one of my good friends from the

24:00 Pioneer Section was drowned there. When the rain was falling heavily and water was coming over the island, I went to where my friend Nelson was, knowing that he couldn't swim, and I asked him to come back up with me onto some higher ground but he wouldn't come and he climbed a tree and unfortunately the tree disappeared with the island

24:30 and he drowned.

So okay, just going back a little bit. What was the purpose of your going up to the Danop River? What was the…?

We were on our way up to the Torricelli Mountains to start making contact with the Japanese in the Torricellies.

And what did you know about the Japanese and their movements and positions?

Oh, that they were up there. We already had two squadrons up there, the 7th and the 9th Squadrons. We knew they'd been in contact with the Japanese into some very heavy fighting and it was

25:00 some of that heavy fighting that I related earlier. I said that the fellows I knew had been cannibalised by the Japanese was in that fighting. We were virtually going up to take another flank. Of the two squadrons that were already up there we would go out then on their southern flank to move along the mountains and push the Japanese in front of us.

Were you sort of advanced,

25:30 **in advance of infantry that was coming behind?**

Oh yes, there was no infantry there. The only infantry when we were there, at that stage, was the 19th Brigade who were operating along the coast. They took over from us on at Badiang, 19th Infantry Brigade, and they were moving along the coast from Badiang. I think at that stage they weren't very far advanced because they ran into some

26:00 very tough opposition, some pretty heavy fighting along there.

So this whole movement is travelling east towards Wewak. Can you just put us in the picture about what was, why Wewak, what was the…?

Wewak was their main base. We knew the Japanese were well entrenched around Wewak. The air force had been flying sorties over there for months before we arrived. They lost a few planes actually, shot down over

26:30 Wewak. They were bombing there and from aerial reconnaissance, they knew that there was the main base. Understand they were bringing in large submarines to supply the area, so it was a pretty important area that we had to take.

So this, you presumably went overland, you walked from Badiang

27:00 **to Danop River?**

From Badiang to the Danop, yes, it wasn't very far but we walked that. Several months ago, well a couple of months earlier, we'd previously patrolled all through that area, we knew the area well and then went up to this junction of the rivers. After, the next day, the artillery got a line over to us, those left on the high

27:30 ground and we were able to ford the river. It was a raging torrent at this stage and we were walking on the one side of the rope to get over. Got over on the river and they fed us, gave us something to eat. I'd lost all my personal stuff. I didn't have shaving gear or anything of that nature, a towel, nothing. Only had my, at this stage I was a number two on a Bren gun, I had a rifle

28:00 and my ammunition and grenades and nothing else. It stayed that way until, I used to share my mate's toothbrush, Kevin Hobson, to clean my teeth. He shared that with me and his shaving gear. I've still got his razor. I gave his shaving brush to his nephew a few years ago when I met him.

28:30 **What happened to Kevin?**

Kevin got killed at Milak. He was a very good soldier but he was killed. It knocked me around a bit.

Can we go back a little bit?

Yeah.

I'm going to keep taking you back to things to get more detail. Just with the flood, the flash flood, I mean that sounds extraordinary that you were camped somewhere and…?

The water came up 30 feet.

29:00 It's recorded in Gavin Long's history of the campaign and in our regimental history, it's given more coverage, the flood. There's a lot in there. I'd need to read it again to refresh my memory.

But from your own personal memory, what was your experience of it? What do you recall happening?

I was very relieved, I knew that it was dangerous and I was very relieved when I got

29:30 up into the higher ground. The high ground incidentally wasn't all that high, as the water was still over my knees, like rushing down. You had to hang onto something but very relieved when I got across the river the next morning.

But when, I mean it took people by surprise so it obviously happened very, very suddenly?

No, we knew it was happening. Unfortunately, this was another thing, unfortunately the natives came down from the hills and warned our people about it, there

30:00 was a flash flood coming, and they ignored it. We, the troopers knew nothing about it but obviously somebody knew. But we'd be probably told to hold our ground in front of the artillery.

How big was this camp of men?

Where we were? About the size

30:30 of this block of land that this house is on, about a quarter acre and it entirely disappeared. The next day there was nothing there. As I say, we went up in 1983, there were 10 of our squadron went up in 1983 and right where that is, is just a riverbed, no sign of any island, washed away completely.

31:00 **So it's likely that this was a kind of regular occurrence, the flash flooding?**

Flooding along there I think would have been regularly. The natives were not unfamiliar with it.

Which is an interesting thing isn't it, just knowledge or lack of knowledge about the terrain that you were working in and how dependent really you were on the local people and their knowledge?

And I think in this case we were rather ignorant not listening. Somebody was ignorant not listening.

31:30 I can't point the finger because I don't know where it lay, got no idea.

But in other situations, how much did you rely on local knowledge about the terrain?

Oh, we had to rely on a lot. We got considerable help from the natives but not on any occasion that I can think of that they weren't right in what they were telling us.

32:00 For instance at Milak when the Japanese were assembling, they told us, "Japan man, he come plenty." We took them, that time we listened to them, but they knew. You could hear the drums drumming out from the villages, sending out messages. The drums were talking. As they say, "Tok, tok" [communicating (PNG pidgin)]

32:30 **And what would those messages be saying?**

In this case you could hear the drums going, up in Milak.

But what would the drums be saying?

Warning that the Japanese were moving towards their village. I suppose by the time the Japanese reached their village, they'd be out. There was a large force of Japanese actually sent against us, that's what would it be, a couple of months later.

33:00 What we're talking about the flood, about two months after the flood.

Were you working with maps on these operations?

Oh yes. Not everyone had a map but there were maps.

So would you show the local people the maps and ask them to give you information about the terrain or…?

I don't think they'd have understand it but in pidgin they'd ask,

33:30 "How steep the mountain? Is there a track up the mountain? How long would it take to get there?" And they'd give an answer like, "Sun i kamup, up, up." You had to work it out how long it would be. But they were very helpful.

So that's how long after sunrise?

Yeah, how long after. The sun's moving up, you get so many

34:00 up, up, ups, they know so many hours. They didn't work by the hour of the day, they worked by when the sun rise, or that's how we experienced it. Other people might have had different experiences but that was ours, so if they gave a few sun up, up, ups, about four of those, you knew you were up for a four-hour track on whatever you were doing but then we'd take a bit longer than them because we were more heavily loaded down

34:30 with gear.

And sometime you would have them along to carry gear for you?

Yes, quite often they'd recruit what they called a 'boong train' to carry supplies. They were paid, they were recruited by the ANGAU [Australia and New Guinea Administrative Unit] officer and they'd be paid porters, carrying ammunition, food. They were different to the natives you'd get up in the villages. These were recruited down

35:00 in the more settled areas where the administration worked. When you got up into the mountains where there was no administration, well, they were a different type of native, like in their knowledge of operating with Europeans.

So they were less used to that? They weren't used to operating with Europeans?

Well they'd been occupied by, in this

35:30 part of New Guinea, northern New Guinea, they'd been occupied by the Germans since the late 1880s and then the British of course kicked them out after World War I and Australia, they became a mandated territory of Australia for about 15 or 20 years and they were used to our administration and the next thing the Japanese are running the whole show. They didn't know where they

36:00 were. Got to feel sorry for them, well I did. They just kept getting pushed around by everybody, but anyhow they like us and they worked with us.

They had very strong traditions and customs and spiritual beliefs and beliefs in sorcery, the New Guineans, did you come across anything like that?

Yeah, dead outside

36:30 big huts, what did they call them? 'Haus Tambaran' [spirit house (PNG pidgin)], big house, and they had their dead sitting outside and they'd take food to the dead, like they were just parched skin over skeleton, often see them there. Never touch them, just look and they'd take food to them.

37:00 Feeding the ancestors. Might have caught that from the Chinese. I think they feed their ancestors, don't they? Or they only pray to them, pray to them I think.

Did you ever come across any hostility from the local people?

No, oh yes, yes, we did. When I say no, we did at Milak. The natives from Maprik were supporting the Japanese attack on us and we ran into them there.

37:30 They had red lap-laps. That's a skirt the natives wear as a lap-lap and if any of the men had red lap-laps you knew darn well that they were working for the Japanese because they were Japanese issue.

Okay, we'll get into that a minute. Now this trip that you did, this patrol that you did down to the Danop, you said prior to that you'd already been doing some patrolling in the region, so you sort of knew the area?

38:00 Yeah, when we first arrived to New Guinea when we were stationed out of Badiang, we actually patrolled all that area.

So can you describe what those operations were all about? Those patrols?

Mainly reconnaissance patrols, although we killed quite a few Japanese that were stragglers and people that got in the road.

38:30 **So can you sort of take me through what a patrol like that was like, what you actually did, what your aims were, how you did it, how many people?**

Oh they'd generally work in a section. That's full strength, that's 17, but as I mentioned we never had that 17, so we'd work with whatever we could as a section and you'd

39:00 have your scout group out in front and be looking all the time for, as you were observing, you just didn't plod behind. Even the man at the rear would be looking behind to see there was no one coming from behind, took every precaution that you weren't been followed, that you weren't walking into an ambush. Had to keep silence on a patrol. All signals that were given were hand signals.

39:30 For instance if the forward scout saw a hut in front, well a hut was always dangerous because the Japanese could be hidden in the hut. He would raise both hands above his head and form just like a roof of a house I suppose, signal a hut and then when that happened the patrol would move around

40:00 in a circle or semi-circle and go in cautiously on the semi-circle side. You couldn't run into an ambush set up on one track, make sure the village was clear. Once the village was clear well then you'd have a good look around, see if they'd been occupied at anytime. The Japanese were pretty dirty people. They'd always leave a mess. If they'd been there

40:30 the evidence was there.

What? Just supplies? What sort of rubbish?

Well they'd leave excreta all around the place, they'd do it anywhere but the natives wouldn't because they had ditches which they used as a latrine and generally water in it and you could smell them but it was

41:00 pretty hygienic for their type of civilized standard of living but the Japanese were not fussy. They'd just leave it anywhere. I think their idea was that they'd spread disease among us through flies and mosquitoes, but that was pretty normal.

Tape 6

00:32 **What I'm curious about now is with these patrols you would have a scout, someone up front as a scout, and then you would have, can you describe to me the way the components of a patrol and the particular things that, so what a scout would have to do, the role of a scout?**

I'll take a typical patrol because as I say there were clearing patrols of which you might only have two or three men to clear a perimeter.

01:00 A reconnaissance patrol might only involve half a dozen to 10 men, but a fighting patrol generally comprised at least two sections, with another section in reserve. You never committed the whole troop on a patrol, a fighting patrol. So they were broken up into different groups. There were scout groups of which every major patrol included,

01:30 that's the, other than a clearing patrol. It involved two scout groups, two separate scout groups and they would alternate their turn of being leading scouts and even within that scout group itself the men would alternate, so that whoever was up leading, the leading scout - the Americans called them point scouts but we called them leading scouts -

02:00 and they would take it in turns because it was such nerve-wracking, that no one could stand if for more than, I'd say 10 minutes. Ten minutes was enough because you were right on your nerve. You knew darn well that every man behind you depended on you, had a bit of weight on your shoulders, so was very tough on the nerves. And behind

02:30 them would come a support group, where you had the officer, like the leader, he would be in the support group. The Bren gunner, the machine gunner, the rifle bomber bloke and a couple of others, a couple of other riflemen and a signal operator, a man to operate the signal sets. Now they had to carry those heavy packs, they were heavy,

03:00 the sig [signal] set on the back and they'd be with you and sometimes you'd have an intelligence corporal from the intelligence section. And that was virtually a patrol group, two scout groups, one on each end and a support group in the centre.

So how far ahead would the scout groups be?

We never bunched up.

03:30 The first two scouts would be fairly close to one another. By fairly close probably about five or six metres and then there'd be a further gap in case the two forward blokes got knocked off, the other bloke had a chance to get back. And then the rest of the patrol would take up say about 20 metres, a further 20 metres

04:00 behind them but that would be the lot.

So 20 metres is a far distance, you needed to keep an eye to be able to see the scouts, didn't you?

No. You had to keep an eye on your sides to make sure you weren't going into an ambush. It was very important you didn't bunch. If you bunched up and you were ambushed, it would clean the lot of you up, whereas if you're spread out and you're ambushed, they're not going to get the lot. So you

04:30 spread out, you're in communication, like each group could sight the last man, like in the first group. They were always in eyeshot but the whole patrol couldn't see the leaders, you couldn't see them, because it was jungle.

So how would communication occur then?

With signals, hand signals and that would follow along the line.

05:00 If he wanted, if the leader, the officer decided you'd swoop around in a semi-circle movement, you'd just give a signal like that and they'd follow right along. Shovel the signal and you'd go around, keeping the same distance, you wouldn't bunch up. Keeping the same distance so you did a very broad sweep of an area.

I imagine it would have been very difficult in very thick jungle?

Yeah, it was hard

05:30 and that was the hard part, not making a noise. Some of the men, as I said earlier, we had trenching tools, others had machetes to cut any vines away, to make a track.

So can you actually recall being on one of these patrols and being aware

06:00 **of the noise and feeling very scared or it's highly likely that the enemy was nearby?**

Oh you knew, you knew when you were in hostile territory; you knew they'd be nearby. Not necessarily in an ambush position but you had to be careful that you made no noise. If you were creeping up on a position, you really had to creep.

So can you describe for me an actual

06:30 **operation that occurred where you did come across some Japanese and you killed them?**

Oh yes, you want me to tell you?

Mm. If you want to.

It's putting it into words. It's hard to describe feelings.

07:00 Oh I suppose it hits you all of a sudden that you're in, you're on action, you're on and all of a sudden it happens, a shot rings out and you're into it. That's about the only way I can explain it.

So a shot rings out and you realise that you're at action stations?

You realise you're on your toes and…

And so what do you do? Do you remember?

You get fired, if you're fired on, you're looking for where the fire comes from

07:30 and you direct the fire into that position.

But do you hit the ground or...?

If you can but if you hit the ground you can't see anything and there's no point in you being there. You've got to stand up. Generally with the Bren, it was a heavy weapon; you'd fire it from the hip. You've probably seen action photographs of Bren gunners

08:00 using the hip. Well that's how you'd use it, put a sling around your neck to get on each side of the gun to support the weight when you walked forward and if they were in front of you, you'd try and eliminate them.

So how many Japanese would you generally come across on one of these sorts of patrols?

Oh it's hard to generalise but

08:30 we cleaned out pockets, well moved out pockets where there might have been 20 or 30. Then we've killed smaller pockets, got the lot of them, say four or five. They all add up at the end of the month, I suppose.

Was it a very populated area that you were moving through in that highland country?

With the Japanese?

09:00 **No, no, with local people and that?**

Oh yes, nearly every village, there was life in the village, an established village. Mainly they were a fair size probably indicating a population of 100, 20, something like that. But you didn't see all the villagers once you moved into a village. The villagers would get to the heck out of it, as I mentioned. I don't think I saw

09:30 a female native or any children until Milak was attacked by the Japanese and they came in to us for protection, so the villagers kept right out, right away from us.

Okay, so going back to the Danop River,

The what?

Going back to the river, the Danop River, after the flood,

10:00 **what happened then? You said that you got across the river?**

Oh yes, the next day we got across the river, we were fed by the artillery and we headed off to the Hump, climbed the Hump that day, went up over 3,000 feet. That was hard and then we were up in the ridges then and we got to a place called Nilu, where our 2/7th Squadron were in there. They were back there resting

10:30 and they were expecting a drop from the air force that day. A DC-3 [Douglas DC3 transport aircraft] came over and dropped out supplies. They called it 'biscuit bombers' [Douglas DC2 for supplies], to drop out supplies and I saw that and they were collected when I was there. Then we moved on a place called Ami, A M I, [just south of the Prince Alexander Mountains, near Maprik] where headquarters were established, squadron headquarters and then

11:00 B Troop, to which I belong to, we went out clearing villages around the Ami area, round (UNCLEAR) and can't think of the name of the others. Killed a few Japs there and got into Wangram, that's right, Wangram village. The Japanese were in force in the next village, Waikim, so it was decided to put an attack on Waikim and that's

11:30 where we had our first battle casualty from B Troop. A fellow by the name of Ray Bradshaw was killed there. Ray was a corporal and he was trying to knock out a Japanese machine gun when he got killed himself. I don't think there was anyone wounded. I think he was the only casualty. The next day,

12:00 we brought Ray's body back to bury him at Wangram and the next day we were putting on an attack and put on an order for the Beaufort bombers to come and soften it up with bombing and then we were going to attack it after the bombers had been, but the Japanese had moved out. They left a few dead so they must have moved out straight after the fight the night before.

12:30 They'd just gone. There was a few dead lying around there. Normally they didn't leave the dead. They'd take them with them or hide them, so we buried them and then moved onto the next village, which was Milak. And we put an attack in on Milak and couldn't take it so we moved back again to Wangram again that night and ordered the bombers again for the following

13:00 day to drop on Milak, and we were going in then, which we did. What they'd do, the bombing directions were of interest. We had white parachutes we'd lay out in a T, with the T-section pointing to, like the cross section pointing to the village, they could see it from the air. We'd get a cleared area, lay that out and then put a two inch smoke mortar bomb on the target, just as they were coming around.

13:30 Just as they were circling round, seeing where the markers were on the ground, we'd put the smoke mortar bomb down and they knew that was the target area and they'd drop on it and mostly they were spot on. They were very good, wonderful bombing. So we ended up going in and taking Milak and from Milak we, then trying to, we did a lot of villages around there.

14:00 Cleaned up around a lot of that area.

Can I just ask you a question? You said with Milak that you'd gone in there and tried to take it but you weren't able to take it so you retreated?

That was the day, the day after we walked into Waikim.

So what actually happened there? You didn't have enough?

They were too heavily entrenched. We couldn't get even past up the main track, it was too strongly defended.

14:30 So we gave that away and came back the next day with the air force to do all the hard work and they did it for us, cause when we got in there a few Japanese were laying around dead that had been killed in the bombing. And we just buried them in their own trenches and set up our own defence system around there and that became our base then for, it was to be

15:00 for the next month or so but ended up it became our fortress.

Where did the bombers, they were Beaufighters were they, the bombers?

No, Beaufort's, Beaufort bombers.

Where did they come from?

Tadji, that was in Aitape, they had a big airstrip there at Tadji. As I mentioned early in the interview, there was Number 7, Number 8 and Number 100 Squadron and they were there to support the troops,

15:30 the whole 6th Division.

And how many of them would come down for something like that?

For a bombing raid, you might get four or five of them. They'd drop 250-pound bombs or 500-pound bombs. Five hundred pound was a pretty big bomb. They were good.

So okay, so you're moving through these villages, taking these villages and then?

16:00 Making sure, we didn't actually take them, making sure that they were clear of enemy. We didn't set up any camp there, we'd just clear them out and make sure they were clean, then move onto the next village, working out of Milak as a base. The reason Peter Perkins, our leader, sat on Milak, he knew we could defend it. It had a high knoll at the centre of the village, although

16:30 early in the piece our perimeter went down further than that. They'd consolidated the night before the Japanese put in a large attack on us but we were then concentrated into a small area.

Okay, so this was the ambush?

It wasn't an ambush. We were actually pinned down. We were not ambushed. We knew the Japanese were coming

17:00 about two or three days before, the nights before, they'd sent in a reconnaissance party to look at us. At this stage we were down the lower section of the village. We had a perimeter down there and a grenade was thrown but it didn't explode. Peter then realised that it was a reconnaissance patrol and they were seeking us out, so he then drew us back into the knoll

17:30 and we dug new defence pits around the knoll. The following morning, they were coming from a village, Guaim Guaim, which was opposite Milak, it was down a ravine an hours walk away and we went into there with Ken Land, Lieutenant Ken

18:00 Land and our sergeant, Bill Brown. That's the one that had the unnecessary operation on the Tablelands and two other fellows, went over one morning to have a look at what was going on at Guaim Guaim. There was a big build up of Japanese and Bill Brown wanted to toss a few grenades but Ken Land told him, "No, we don't want them to know we've been onto them." So they pulled

18:30 back to Milak, reported in to Peter and Peter put an attack in that afternoon and I was in that attack. Bill Brown was killed in that attack and another fellow by the name of Jackson was badly wounded. We were lucky to be able to get Bill's body back and also to get Jackson out. He was pretty badly wounded in the stomach, so we got them out and got back to Milak and

19:00 the following night they attacked, the 13th of March they attacked. There was a lot of them. We knew there was a lot because they were building up. You could see them, from our position you could see them coming into Guaim Guaim and we knew we were in for a fight. The OC

19:30 of the Squadron wanted Peter Perkins to withdraw, come back the Ami, but Peter took the right course, said, “No, we’ll stop here and fight.” Normally commandos don’t do that, they get out but Peter decided to stay there and he was very confident we’d beat the Japanese. We got in that night, they got in a mortar detachment from the

20:00 2/7th Battalion, came in, a trench mortar under Tony Gannon and I think there were five others. Didn’t know their names, can’t think of them at the moment but I knew quite a few of them. Donovan, Michael Donovan, ‘Tangle foot’, they called him and Eric Pittman,

20:30 lives up at Manly in Queensland, seen Eric since the war and another old fella who’d escaped out of Greece. He’d been a World War I digger, he’d escaped out of Greece and there he was at Milak with this mortar detachment. I forget his name but they sent him after that. They were wonderful. If it hadn’t been for the three-

21:00 inch mortar and the air force, we would have been definitely overrun and wiped out. But the air force with their accurate bombing around the perimeter, they kept it up. The Japanese kept the pressure on us for nine days before they decamped. We killed a lot of them. I know in the night of the first attack, I counted 14. I was Number Two on the Bren gun with my mate Kevin Hobson

21:30 and about 14 of them came up on the horizon. They had their packs on and everything. They were there to come and occupy, they were there to stay and he saw them and he said, “How many do you count?” And I said, “Oh I reckon there’d be at least a dozen.” He said, “Well I’ve counted 14.” He said, “There’ll be a few more. We’d better let a few more get up before we start firing.” The officer, Peter Perkins, called out, “Fire.”

22:00 So anyhow Hobbo got right into them with the Bren and he was loading up the second magazine when he caught a full burst of machine gun through the head and he was killed instantly. So I became the gunner and I called out for help in the pit, I needed help, cause there’s only room for two in a weapon pit,

22:30 and Jack Simpson, he was a friend of mine. He was a corporal in 5 Section, he came down and pulled, with the aid of another one, pulled Hobbo’s body out and Jack hopped in the pit with me and we had a pretty busy night.

And Hobbo was your best mate, wasn’t he?

Yeah.

23:00 (TAPE STOPS)

You know how you showed us the painting before, actually can you tell me the story behind that painting of the Milak?

Yes, we went up to Milak, to Wewak actually, 10 from the squadron, in 1983 with the purpose of getting up to Milak to see the natives and to see what had happened in the years we hadn’t been

23:30 there, and hopefully we’d run into somebody we’d know or see. So we hired a Hi-Ace vehicle in Wewak and drove up there. There’s a road up there of sorts but we got up there anyhow. And that’s when we saw Aligo, who was the headman of the village, and Malliwongo, the government-appointed chief of the village, and they were the two little boys that carried

24:00 the bombs into, the two-inch mortar bombs into Milak when we were attacking the place. There they were, bosses of the village and telling all the others who we were and I got a photo taken of course with all the villagers around, and Aligo and Malliwongo on each side of me because they knew me. I think I had snow white hair and probably

24:30 it stood out as different to all the others, so they remembered me alright, but it was good going back. We did a bit for them. The next day we went over to Maprik, the trading post there, the trading store and brought them a lot of supplies, rice, they weren’t doing all that well and cans of tinned fish,

25:00 stuff we got out of the store for them. Spent about 100 dollars on them and told them to come over and take the goods back, so they took it back with them. Then we decided we’d do something about getting them established into a business and we got clothes donated. Got them around Melbourne and over in South Australia, in Kadina, he’s dead now, Jack Rosewall,

25:30 lived there and he was in Rotary and he got the Rotary Clubs in that area to collect clothes. They also raised money. Marge washed all the clothes that came here and vetted them out. Anything that was no good were, you’d be surprised, but would you even believe we got a dinner suit? That’s how stupid people could be, but shorts, and t-shirts and light shirts, short-sleeved shirts and stuffs like that.

26:00 She washed it all so it was all nice and clean. We got some good stuff. The Ansett Airways flew it up to, by this time we had a half a ton, which is a lot of clothing. They flew it up to Port Moresby. The RAAF had a transport base at Lae and they flew it from Moresby to Wewak.

26:30 Mrs Fitzgerald, who was the, ran the store at Wewak, her husband was up there with the 6th Division during the war, he died and she’d stayed on and ran the store there and she got it up to Milak village in

one of their trucks, so they had cash, which we left with her. Every time she had a truck going up to Maprik would they throw on some rice and stuff for the people in the village, and we thought that

27:00 they might with that much clothing, they might have set up a store and started to trade with the other natives and got a bit of food in, in payment for the clothes and worked up a bit of a business. It didn't happen like that and all we got were begging letters. One bloke he wanted us to buy him a steel guitar, electric guitar.

27:30 So I wrote a letter back to him and said, "Why do you want this electric guitar? All you're going to do is annoy the other villagers around you. You can't play an electric guitar and where's the electricity coming from?" Back came another one, "You buy me a gym set?" So we soon dropped that lot off, although Ken Land, he was with Rotary over in Preston, they got behind it too, did quite a bit of work for them, the natives up there at Milak.

28:00 And he brought a girl down, a daughter, a granddaughter I think of Aligo's and she stayed in the house there for a while just to give her an idea of how Europeans lived, gave her a bit of a holiday.

Gee it's great that you did that.

Yeah, we thought we might have got them onto something but no, they were still, probably they were fighting over who got what pair of trousers.

28:30 **Do you mind going back and talking about Milak a bit more, just some of the details? You said before that you could see the Japanese building up? In what way could you see?**

Oh you could see them massing troops. They'd get down the bottom of the village and where I was covering with the

29:00 Bren gun, that particular part of the sector, anyhow that night I had to keep up continuous fire. I couldn't knock off to give them a chance to get a machine gun onto me. As a matter of fact they got one up a tree to fire into our high position to get to the mortar itself and as soon as he let go one shot I saw where it came

29:30 from. They were using tracer bullets, that's how stupid they were and the next thing I let him have a burst and the next thing I heard the gun clatter down to the ground and a cry went out and if he wasn't killed, he certainly hurt himself in the drop. So that put an end to that one. The barrel actually fused on the gun, it was that hot. I must have fired a couple of thousand rounds

30:00 I suppose that night. Just couldn't let up. They didn't come back up that way again for the rest of the time they attacked Milak, they never came up that path. They knew they were in for a hot reception but the next morning I was changed out of the pit I was in, where my mate Kevin was killed and went up to another pit because they had that pit, the one I was originally in, they had that marked. They had mortars, a

30:30 couple of trench mortars and they'd have probably put a couple of mortars into there, so I was taken up into another area to cover, and it was pretty hairy. The, we found out later on that a force of 340 had been sent against us, which we know about 150 would have been in the initial attack, cause we counted around about 48 dead the next day.

31:00 We'd killed that many of them and they certainly would have taken away just as many wounded, so we gave them a pretty good thrashing on that front, but they kept it up. They tried different angles and different areas of approach. One night they were trying to get up a slope near where my pit was, and we threw a couple of grenades down there.

31:30 The noise went so we must have killed them. Before we moved out of Milak, before we were relieved, we had to go around and clean up the dead around the perimeter and there were 11 down there. Whether I'd got them with the grenades or not, I don't know. They could have been killed by aircraft flying over and strafing the area. The air force were wonderful there. They were putting bombs down, oh 30, 40 yards

32:00 in front of my weapon pit. The mortar was dropping them down at least 10, 15 yards in front. Tony Gannon was magnificent. It was the first time they'd ever used a mortar dismounted from a tripod. It was held in the hand, not by the bare hands, he had some protection over his hands, probably an old pair of trousers or something like that, to stop them from burning. Cause the heat of the mortar coming out of

32:30 the barrel would have burnt his hands, so it was an exercise that he'd practiced on the Atherton Tablelands before coming up and there's a bit of a story here. Mortar officers apparently come from artillery units and the mortar was always considered more of an artillery piece cause it had a minimum range when mounted of 250 yards. Well Tony realised it in an earlier action at Mabo, he was in

33:00 a year before, that had he been able to drop mortars closer to where the action was he could be more damaging onto the enemy than having to fire from a fixed mounting. So on the Tablelands he and his group practiced using the weapon as a close support weapon and it was devastating. It really was, putting him so close to the forward perimeters, the Japanese had no hope

33:30 of getting up into our positions. Some of them got up. One of them was killed laying down outside a pit. He got up that night, right up outside the pit and he'd gone to sleep there and we pointed out to a friend of mine, Dave Edgerton, "Nip [Japanese], nip down there." He looked over and, "putt," got him. I saw it.

So can you just describe the layout, I mean I saw the painting

34:00 **which is a depiction of that quarter acre, I think you said it was, wasn't it?**

It would be no more than a quarter acre on top of the knoll.

And you were at a forward edge?

Yeah, I was on a command pit.

And Tony, the mortar guy?

Tony was behind me. He would have been about five or six yards behind me but he was putting down mortar bombs. He was virtually holding the mortar barrel horizontal, vertical, not horizontal, but vertical

34:30 to lob. They were worried that they'd come into our pit but it didn't happen. He put them down in front and oh he was really good and they had a lot of mortar bombs there and they really plastered the area with mortars. The Japanese gave the mortars away. They opened up with the mortar but I think Tony got him early with the trench mortar. You could see where the mortar

35:00 position was and he knocked their mortar out. He's a fellow I hope you get, talk to Tony. He's got a lot to offer.

Why did the Japanese give up on the mortar?

Why did they give up on it? It's a very nasty weapon. The trench mortar it's got a great field of throwing shrapnel. It can throw it maybe 80 yards, 100

35:30 yards and spread it out. It's not a nice thing to have against you but it's a good one for you.

So these mortars that Tony was firing were dropping 10 to 15 yards in front of your trench, you pit, were you at risk of being hit?

In front of the trench, didn't care at the time, well I was comforted at the time that the Japanese couldn't get up

36:00 there. The mortar fire was too devastating. See one thing with a machine gun firing from a high position, if they get under the field of fire, they can get you, like if anyone came under the field of fire of what I'm firing, particularly from a height, I'd be easy meat for them. They'd just lob a grenade in on me. But with his fire,

36:30 his wonderful mortar control they had no hope of doing it. They had no hope.

So what would the rate of mortar fire be, how many per minute?

Oh I think they can get about 10 in the air before the first one lands. Depends on what they want to do, that's with the normal firing position of a mortar, but the way he was using it, probably about three.

37:00 Have three down the barrel before the first one hit. Because with the weather up there it was wet and once you get water in a mortar barrel you're likely to get a mortar bomb drop right at your feet. So they had to put the cap on quickly to make sure no water got in the barrel. They had like a leather cover fitted over

37:30 the top.

So it was raining all through this attack?

Oh most nights it rained, very seldom was it dry. You were in wet clothes all the time.

So how long were you up on the knoll for, how many days did that?

Nine days, before the

38:00 company of the 2/6th Battalion came in to relieve us. Earlier they'd got in two or three of their senior sergeants to have a look at the position, they got them in there early. Be about two or three days before the rest of the company arrived and among one of those was a fella by the name of Smoky Hedderman [Lieutenant J. W. Hedderman, DCM, MM]. He

38:30 was a sergeant and one of the highest decorated men in the 6th Division. He won a Distinguished Conduct Medal and a Military Medal. He was a terrific bloke, Smoky. Very comforting to have people like that round you when your nerves are just about shot and you've had enough and then a bit of strength comes in, and it's good. It's good for the morale.

I guess that's an aspect,

39:00 **it's just not helping with the fighting, it's having someone fresh and the morale.**

Oh the fighting was over, the hard fighting was over by then but it was comforting to see them there. You knew that the cavalry weren't far behind. I didn't mean our cavalry, I meant the American cavalry when they were fighting the Indians.

So I'm imagining up on this knoll that you've got the Japanese in, were they

39:30 **flanking you?**

Completely surrounded us.

Completely surrounded you? So how did…

They left one track open and they got, we had one fellow there, Ken Kirwan, he was a veteran of Greece and Crete with the 2/4th Battalion and he'd come as a commando from Canungra and Ken was going down to fire the hut, a hut the Japanese were getting into this hut and

40:00 we were a bit worried they'd climb up the high of the roof and then get a bit of angle of us, fire down on us, so Ken said he'd fire the hut. He got wounded going down to get it. They had a 2/1st Field Ambulance corporal there, Bob Webster, from New South Wales. He was a big bloke Bob and he went down and pulled Ken out and

40:30 a police boy, a native police boy decided he'd fire the hut and he got wounded. He got shot through the jaw and Bob pulled him out. Bob was mentioned in despatches but he should have got the Military Medal. He was very good, a brave lad. You're wondering how a police boy came there? I've forgotten to tell you.

41:00 This is one of the jokes of Milak. There was a group of Allied Intelligence Bureau people and they were called FELO, Far East Liaison Office, that's right, Far East Liaison Office, and they came in with loudspeakers the day, when they knew the Japanese were assembling at Guaim Guaim, that's the village opposite, where Bill Brown was killed,

41:30 they sent these fellows over from FELO with big loudspeaker systems to tell the Japanese to surrender. God, it was humorous and they got telling the Nips to surrender and the next thing the Nips blasted the loud speakers to pieces with machine gun fire. We roared laughing. Anyhow the, fancy thinking, there they are massing to attack us, fancy thinking they were going to come and surrender, that's the mentality.

Tape 7

00:32 **Keith, we're just going to talk a little bit more about Milak or Milak and perhaps the role of the air force and the bombers there?**

Yeah I mentioned how wonderful they were in support to us and at great loss to themselves too, because they lost two Beaufort bombers in supporting the soldiers at Milak and one I actually saw explode in the air and I understood later on that

01:00 it had run out of Australian made bombs and they were using Japanese bombs that had been recovered from the But and Dagua airstrips along the coast and apparently they had a different timing device or the angle was not suited for the discharge from Australian bombers and they released this particular bomb and the plane went up in a huge ball of flame.

01:30 It was very sad to see that because they were doing such a splendid job for us and to come out to a tin pot little show like ours and lose their lives, I thought it was pretty sad.

Did you ever have a chance, or any of your men, have a chance to thank them personally?

Oh yes, we've had them along to many of our national reunions. 2/10th Squadron has had five national reunions and the air force people are invited and

02:00 also representatives from the navy who were associated with later on in the amphibious landing at Dove Bay.

When did it become apparent that the battle, the work there was done? That you were no longer at risk?

Fortunately it came at a time when we were very low on ammunition and cause the expenditure rate had been pretty high

02:30 and fortunately then the Japanese broke it off, broke off the contact and moved out I think six or eight days later. No, it was a bit longer than that and we had noticed by the lack of activity, there was still a bit of spasmodic fighting but it was localised in different sectors around the perimeter. We knew that

the main thrust had gone

03:00 so we had severely edged them, we knew that. We knew that we'd inflicted heavy loss on them. The infantry came in to relieve us. I think about oh five or six days after the Japanese had broken off the action. What we'd done, we'd actually broken the resistance of the Japanese in that area. There was no doubt about it because Maprik fell to the

03:30 infantry not long after. The Japanese we knew had raised a force of 1,000, 1,000 of their best troops. They had equipped them all with new uniforms, we knew that from the dead, that they were in good uniforms and when we saw them arrive with their fully kitted-out packs on their backs we knew that they intended occupying and taking over the position. Had they done that, they would have stopped

04:00 the, virtually stopped the whole of the 17th Brigade advance through the Torricelli Mountains. They broke off their engagement with us and went over to where our other troops were, C and A Troop, but C were at, can't recall the names of the villages, but they were not all that far from us but they couldn't lend us any assistance because they were flat out looking

04:30 after themselves. They were also being attacked by part of this thousand strong Japanese force. It was there to get rid of the squadron, the commandos.

So you were obviously outnumbered. What was the ratio then of enemy soldiers to you guys?

We understood that those that attacked at Milak were a force of 350. We know that in the first attack there was 150 because we

05:00 got that from the Japanese after the war, who'd been in the action and of which I'd say in the first night we killed probably a third of them, so the other third, no doubt were casualties, so they would have been calling on the rest of their 200 men, held in reserve to keep up the pressure on us over the ensuing days. So we really hurt them. They didn't hurt us all that much. We only

05:30 had Kevin Hobson killed. He was killed on the first night and what's his name? Ken Kirwan wounded. There was another, Ken Buckland, he was wounded in the face. I think probably only about three wounded and one killed and the Japanese, we're

06:00 pretty certain we would have killed up 100 of them.

I know you've told us but for the record again, how many of you were there up there on the?

There were 30 of us and we were depleted. We were down to about half strength of the normal strength of a troop, but we'd been campaigning for a while and we'd lost fellows in the bomb explosion on the Atherton Tablelands that were never replaced and then we lost fellows at the flood, so our troop was down to about half strength.

06:30 But fortunately we were well led. We had wonderful officers there. You couldn't fault any of them. They were, Alan Roper had Six Section and Ken Land Four Section and Neil Redman had Five Section. Neil was killed about a month later unfortunately. He was a fine man too. Peter Perkins, as I mentioned before, was awarded the MC [Military Cross] for the action there. And

07:00 I was rather surprised that Tony Gannon hadn't been recommended for some award because his work was outstanding but Bob Webster from the 2/1st Field Ambulance, he was mentioned in despatches, so with Peter and Bob, they were the ones that came out with a pat on the back, but they deserved it.

You've probably told us but what really was the key to your success there?

We had a good position to

07:30 defend. The siting of the weapon pits was excellent. We were in a contained area. We had the strength of a good three-inch mortar from a detachment from the 2/7th Battalion under Tony Gannon and the air force, the wonderful work they did, so that was our success. They put it down to

08:00 air force and Tony Gannon. Without them, no doubt we would have gone under.

Before Keith, you were telling us about it seems you were drenched most of the time, you were wet. I mean it was just the way it was and did that lead to problems of health and hygiene?

Well hygiene, it's amazing you asked me that. You didn't have any water to clean your teeth or wash

08:30 yourself. Water was on a premium, because we were on a knoll and fortunately they were able to get some water up in cane, some big canes. They knocked some sections out in between and carried the water up. The natives got that up to us but we didn't have water for any other purpose other than drinking. Although we had a latrine dug, we couldn't use the latrine because it was

09:00 under surveillance by the Japanese. They had that pretty well covered, so that was out of use. I don't think I used my bowels for the whole time we were there, for the nine days. Sheer fright, I don't know, but I didn't. I suppose, I don't know how the others got on. I quite frankly don't know. I had an empty, Jack Simpson who had joined me in the pit after Kevin was killed, he

09:30 had a part of a bully beef tin. We used to urinate in that and just throw it over the side of the pit. I suppose the others were doing something like that.

What about sleep? Was there such a thing?

Very hard to sleep. One night we tried to sleep and some rats got into the pit and there were rats everywhere as rats feed on the dead and there was a bit of dead around of course and they were just being encouraged.

10:00 And a couple of them hopped in the pit with us and we were making such a din, Jack and I to kill these rats to throw them out that Peter Perkins came over with our acting troop sergeant then, Jim Monk, expecting to find Japanese into our pit and rather surprised when all we were doing was trying rats and not Japanese. I don't think anyone broke down from hygiene, although there was a lack of it.

10:30 There was no hygiene.

What about in general, on those patrols, I mean were things like beri beri or scrub typhus, those sorts of things ever a problem?

You had spray to put on for scrub typhus. You put it in the crotch of your pants where the two legs came into your crotch and you used to put it there and under the arm of your shirt, anywhere that hair grew, was the only place you had to worry about with scrub typhus.

11:00 We did have one man go down with scrub typhus but he was not in our, he was at squadron headquarters, a fellow by the name of Lieutenant Perry. He went down with scrub typhus. There was no malaria up there to my knowledge. Can't recall anyone having a malaria attack and no beri beri, although it's a wonder because we didn't get any fresh food at all.

11:30 All you lived on was a tin of bully beef and a packet of biscuits was one day's rations for two men. We had young Aligo in the pit with us and we fed him so there were three out of a tin of bully beef and a packet of biscuits, so that's probably one reason why I didn't need to go to the latrine. I wasn't eating anything.

So once you'd been

12:00 **replaced at Milak by the infantrymen, what was the next phase?**

We made our way back to the coast then to rest, to have a rest. I was in the rearguard, I had to, there were four of us in the rearguard, Alan Roper, the lieutenant of Six Section, and Butch Bell, a friend of mine who was a Don R with me and there was one other, Keith Wickham, he was an ex-Don R too and

12:30 he was with Six Section and we had to show the infantry the different tracks around the area and acquaint them with what we knew of the area. After we'd served our purpose, they just told us leave and go, so we headed off back to Ami, and visited the grave where Bill Brown had been killed and Ray Bradshaw. They'd reburied them at Ami and there was quite a commando

13:00 cemetery there. By this time, of course, the other troops had been suffering casualties. We had a couple of lieutenants killed in one action, Rex Cater and {N. J.] 'Bluey' Liles, I don't know what his first name was but they were lieuts with A Section. They were killed in an action and there were others that had been killed and they had quite a cemetery. So we went up and paid our respects to them and got, I forget what we got. I think I

13:30 got myself a new hat cause mine had been shot through anyhow and it had bullet holes through it, so it warranted a new one. Got that from the quartermaster's store and then hopped off down the track. We got as far as Wolum, which was a staging camp, and decided the food there wasn't bad so we holed up there for a few days and till we were told to move on. It was there that we saw

14:00 and met [Lieutenant, later Captain] Reg Saunders, the Aboriginal officer who was rather unique. He was in the 2/7th Battalion and met him. He was a fine type of man. Gee he was a nice bloke, Reg Saunders. He commanded the respect of all his platoon; you could see that. They absolutely idolised him because we were there long enough to see it. Then we got back to the coast and hitched a ride from Suain, which was at the

14:30 mouth of the Danop River, back to our old pal the Danop, and then got a ride up to, by this time the engineers had put a road right through and a bridge over the Danop, so we got back to Aitape and joined the rest of the boys. Drunk a lot of beer because it had accumulated. There was two bottles a man a month, or something like that. You got it for the whole troop, so for the 72 fellows that weren't there, 30

15:00 got a ration of 72. It had accumulated over a long time plus the wounded and the dead of course, we got theirs. We stayed full for a few days and the officers just left us alone and didn't even bother mounting guard or anything like that. Just let us relax and swim off the beach at Aitape and generally got back to reasonable

15:30 health. We were shifted down to But, which had fallen to the infantry quite a while earlier, the 16th Brigade. It was there I met an old school friend of mine. I knew he was with the 2/3rd Battalion so I

went along to see him. Bill Maisey his name was. He was a pretty well known soldier in the 2/3rd Battalion. And had a few beers with him and his mates and we were training then at But to

16:00 do an amphibious landing at Dove Bay [10-15 kilometres east of Wewak]. We were going to, two squadrons of commandos, the 2/9th and the 2/10th, were going to be transported, or were transported eventually to Dove Bay to cut off a Japanese retreat down to the Sepik area. So apart from drinking a few beers and retraining not much happened.

What would the retraining have involved?

16:30 Oh, learning how to get on and off warships. They were going on the sloops, the [HMAS] Dubbo and the [HMAS] Colac were transporting us and we did actually get up and down on those off But and then we practiced coming off the barges, fanning out on the beaches and what to do and training the movements to get ashore with minimum casualties. But it must have paid dividends because we didn't lose

17:00 anyone in the landing. It was a big show the landing, big to us anyhow. We had the support of several warships, HMAS Hobart, a light cruiser, the English heavy cruiser, the HMS Newfoundland, the Warramunga and the Arunta, two new Tribal Class destroyers. We were among the bombardment group that stood offshore and bombarded the

17:30 beachhead. We had the Colac and Dubbo and also the Swan, the HMAS Swan, which is a bit bigger than the frigates. Some ML launches, they were motor torpedo boats going along shore firing in. Each barge went ashore with, mounted with trench mortars mounted on the decks of the barges and Vickers machine guns,

18:00 a couple of Vickers to fire close as you got into shore. We transferred from the warships onto the barges very early in the morning and headed off into the beach, to land at around about a quarter to six in the morning. Had been a big bombardment, the air force of course had been in there softening up the Japanese positions and would you believe after all that, they put us down in the wrong place.

18:30 Where they'd been softening up was about half a mile up the beach, around Brandi, oh more than half a mile, Brandi and Mandi, villages where the Japanese were concentrated. They dumped us into a swamp and first of all we went onto a sandbank and I could see all these fellas going off. The sections men were going off the barges and disappearing.

19:00 When it came to my turn to go off I thought, "God, I'm going to die here," because everyone was disappearing and when I went off the barge I went under and I thought, "Thank God, I won't drown because I can swim." Anyhow we got ashore, nice and wet, and clambered up the beach and took up a position right in the middle of a swamp, a mangrove swamp, which was very unhealthy. It was bad, it was alive with mosquitoes and I think that's where I got malaria.

19:30 We moved out of that after a few days and patrolled around there and cleared the area east of there. Made sure there was no Japanese on the other side of the swamp then 2/9th Squadron had been up in the Mandi and Brandi area and they needed relieving because they'd been catching a few casualties so we went up there and took over from them, the 2/10th Squadron. I might add that this was the first

20:00 time that the two squadrons had been together and it was also the first time that the 2/10th Squadron had fought as a squadron, normally we fought as troops, individually and independent of each other.

It sounds like you're almost acting as infantry?

It's virtually what we were, assault troops. So the role of commando had stopped at that stage and we were being back under the control

20:30 of infantry brigadiers who didn't know the difference between what a commando should do and what an infantryman should do.

So was it just a problem of availability or was it because you…?

I don't think so, I think it was lack of knowledge of what we were capable of doing. When we were up in the Torricellies operating up there, I'm sure that the 17th Brigade understood what we were all about but when we went down we came under the 19th Brigade

21:00 and I don't think they had a clue what we were on about.

So what did the men in the squadrons think about that, being put into the…?

Didn't think much about it, just something else to, wasn't it? You're still there with the one aim. You're out to kill and stop being killed yourself. Anyhow, we ran into quite a lot of heavy action particularly attacking at Brandi.

21:30 There's a high school now in the area where we had some very decisive fighting. We lost a few fellas there. We had one big attack that's worth remembering. By this time the squadron, which normally had a complement of over 300, was down to 70 men and decided to do a full squadron attack on this position at Brandi village. We had an

22:00 artillery spotter with us, we had a few attachments there and this artillery spotter, I was in the contact

patrol that went up and made contact with the Japanese to try and work out where their positions, came back again and then we had to take this artillery officer up, brought him up. In this section there were about 10 of us, took him up and he took a position. We withdrew again and the artillery put a few shells down. We had to go back

22:30 the third time to see whether they were on target and then he made the correction and then they brought 800 rounds of ammunition down on that, shells, twenty-five pounder shells [field artillery] on that Japanese position and it was some bombardment. That's a lot of guns. It was a full [artillery] regimental shoot and when we went back after the artillery had finished, we went back

23:00 in. There were a few Japanese that were shell shocked, just knocked them off, and of the 25 pillboxes, we couldn't get past this place earlier. We tried attacking it without any support and we now understood why. Of the 25 pillboxes, they'd knocked out 17 of them. The firing was fantastic, great work. So after that was over, we went back. We still

23:30 went behind the perimeter on the beachhead. Well, not behind the perimeter but we formed the perimeter. By this stage we were depleted. We were down to very few effective soldiers in the squadron and we were relieved by a machine gun battalion, the 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion. Taken out by barge and back down to a place called Karawop, or Boiken the first time,

24:00 Boiken. Supposed to be a safe area to give us a rest because we'd been in action for a while. Probably about seven or eight weeks we'd been in action and we were taken down there for a rest and just after we arrived the Japanese put in a raid, so we knew we were in for a hot time. Obviously they'd been observing what was going on with the barge movement and barges

24:30 and realised that there was a transfer of troops going on. The machine gunners out, the weary commandos in and they bunged on a fairly decent sort of an act that night with nitric acid bombs. They got the nitric acid out of the bombs and they wrapped them around with loose cane to form like a basket bomb and they'd throw those in. A few of the fellas got hit and they were unlucky.

25:00 I'll never forget this. The first time I'd ever had my clothes off in the, since I'd been up in New Guinea, and we were told it was a safe area so I stripped off my gear, had a swim and then got back into, lay under a mosquito net, which was very dangerous to do. But I did it and when that bomb went off, I grabbed the gun, jumped into a shell hole that was existing there from a bombardment

25:30 earlier, and got ready to repulse the Japanese raid that didn't come into the perimeter, but I was eaten alive with mosquitoes. I soon got my gear back on.

So they were just lobbing these in?

Just lob them, throw them in.

So how were they able to get so close to the camp?

We were told it was a safe area and they got a bit slack in the security and instead of mounting a full perimeter

26:00 defence, it was just more or less a skeleton type of guard on.

So you were seven or eight weeks at, now was that known as Dove Bay?

Yes.

That was Mandi, Brandi?

Yeah.

So you were dropped, you said you were a mile or so from the place that had been bombarded?

Been softened up.

Been softened up, so I'm just trying to get geographically a sense. You were

26:30 **to the west were you, or…?**

No, yes we were travelling, we were east of where they dropped them and then we had to move up west, back up to the village area. They were quite big villages.

So their resistance must have been pretty strong for it to last that period of time?

The which?

The resistance there from the Japs, for you to be there seven or eight weeks?

But we weren't in action all that time,

27:00 we weren't fighting all the time, not every day. You'd send a patrol out, you might be on a patrol every third day, but when an attack came, when an attack was planned well you were involved.

And those, the Japanese, where were they coming from, from the hinterland?

Yeah, they were coming down from the mountains. They had a big, they had a 105 [millimetre] artillery piece there and also a 75 [millimetre artillery] and they used to shell our position quite often.

27:30 The HMAS Swan used to stand off and belt them back at them and one day the Swan signalled they were calling off the engagement because they'd run out of ammunition and the Japs must have been able to read the signal and they started shelling the Swan instead of us. So the Swan upped anchor and got out very fast. I don't know whether they scored a hit or not, they might have, I don't know.

28:00 Didn't see it again.

And what would happen in between those patrols, if you said every three days or so?

You'd be manning weapon pits and like that sort of thing. Weapon pits were manned every day. The Japanese put in some attacks. They put in a very attack one morning. The morning after, we moved up to Brandi and we had some 2/1st Battalion mortar crew with us.

28:30 I think there might have been about three trench mortars and they fired a few shots to gauge their distances and whatnot and take a few aims. What the Japanese did of course was zero in on the mortars from the firing and the next morning they opened up with shellfire. I think there were three mortarmen killed but they cleaned up one mortar, landed a direct hit. It was just,

29:00 we were in a pit just forward of them, you could see it happen, saw these blokes get it and then the Japanese put in an attack. Well what they, they were running on a front and what they didn't realise was we'd half-circled our perimeter and this stage Butch Bell, my number two on the Bren, he was well experienced soldier from the Middle East and Syria and he said,

29:30 "Well, Snowy, you got your birthday present early." There was this Jap officer running out with his sword, he was a big tall bloke. He had a sword in front, he was running, and behind him they were carrying a woodpecker, running with the woodpecker to set it up in position. So I took my present early.

How many of them were there?

Oh there were about five.

30:00 The officer with the sword and his gun crew, there were four of them carrying the gun, one of each part of the supporting frame.

This is about the second or third time we've heard about these mad rushes towards, it sounds insane. What did you think of the Japanese as soldiers?

Well I don't

30:30 think they were any pushover quite frankly, not in our experience or my experience did I find that they were easy anywhere. They were always prepared to fight. I can't say they were good soldiers because they were barbaric people. You think of our POWs over in Malaya and whatnot

31:00 and you heard of them eating rats and they were that starved, they never resorted to eating human beings. I couldn't understand how one human could eat another.

So you were saying that no prisoners were taken, that was still the case here at Dove Bay?

Oh yes, we never took prisoners.

And what was generally happening on the patrols? It sounds like, were the patrols more along the lines of the commando-type

31:30 **patrols that you used to do?**

Oh yes, gone back our usual type of patrolling. We tried to get up to where the guns were but they had the position too heavily defended. We couldn't get anywhere near them. We didn't have the support of any natives in that area. The Japanese had been there for too long. They'd been there for two and a half years I think and of course they'd won the native population over so we didn't get any assistance from that quarter.

32:00 We were flying blind and it was a difficult area cause we were working, as I mentioned, near swamps so it was hard moving through there with the Japanese on high ground. Anywhere we moved we were virtually under surveillance and they knew where we were.

And you said that the squadron, I assume both the 2/9 and 2/10 lost

32:30 **a lot of men, you said there was a lot of casualties?**

A lot of sickness.

Sickness?

Oh yeah, malaria, a lot of malaria. So many went down with malaria, cause we were in swamps, it had

to happen, although we had battle casualties as well. Ken Land, a friend of mine from our troop who commanded the 4th Section, he was wounded,

33:00 badly wounded in the leg in one ambush when the Japanese had ambushed us and Alan Maurer was killed on that same ambush. We couldn't get Alan's body out. He got cannibalised, we couldn't his body out, it was hard to get the patrol out cause there weren't that many of us.

And he was cannibalised did you say?

We buried him a couple of days later

33:30 and they'd ripped some meat off him. We buried another one a couple of days later from C Troop, fella by the name of McDonald. No, you couldn't move too far down there without them knowing where you were.

And what would happen, how would you clear the wounded and the sick?

34:00 You'd have to get them back to what we called an RAP, a Regimental Aid Post, where we had a doctor and medical orderlies, trained medical orderlies, our own people and our doctor at that stage was Noel De Garis. He'd been with the regiment for quite a while, a few years. He was a very good doctor, caring doctor, and he'd seen so many of them die,

34:30 wounded, up in the hills and different places. It used to upset him I know that because he knew them as well as we knew them, but he was a good doctor, Noel.

You said that you weren't a very religious man, what about the men around you? Was religion an important?

Oh yes, a few of them were but we had one fella, he's dead now, Larry Foley, Laurie Foley,

35:00 from Goulburn. Laurie was very religious. He had the biggest cross I'd ever seen in my life around his neck with his dead meat tickets [identity discs] and I remember Keith Wickham, this fella I mentioned earlier, saying to him, "You'd better make sure you get on solid ground, off the barge, Laurie, with all that junk around your neck, you're going to drown." But I don't think Laurie took too kindly to all that, but he survived the war,

35:30 decent bloke, like. I think perhaps later in life he saw the humour, but he didn't at the time.

Did it ever have an effect on you or your spirituality or your ties to any sort of religious affiliation?

No, no, no, I'd been brought up to be religious. My mother was very strong in the church and we had to go when we were young. When I joined the army, I

36:00 don't think I attended a church service. I think I'd had enough religion when I was young to last me for the rest of my life.

So at the end of that seven, eight weeks the powers that were decided that you'd had enough, you'd been there long enough?

Yes, we were brought back to rest, but then of course where we were resting became actually another battle zone because we were shifted away from Boiken onto Karawop,

36:30 which was a piece of land jutting protruding out. It was like a peninsula, a small peninsula of land, and that was an easy place to defend although there was a very high mountain overlooking it, so we had to have a standing patrol there all the time to make sure the Japanese didn't get that position, otherwise they would have cleaned the whole camp up down below. But Karawop was quite okay.

37:00 It was from Karawop I was sent to hospital. I had hookworm. I remember going to Noel De Garis and I said I was ill. I broke up on a patrol and I started to get stomach cramps and I was really pretty crook and to get back and I heard him say to Keith Barrett, the RAP sergeant, "I think he's done his nerve, better get him into hospital."

37:30 It wasn't that at all. When I got into hospital they immediately diagnosed me with hookworm and I was immediately put into an isolation tent. That was at Cape Wom, the CCS, the Casualty Clearing Station, and there was one other fella in the tent with me and they must have thought it was an infectious complaint. I don't know what it was but the worm had got up through your feet, through

38:00 walking in swamp country, because we didn't wear socks or anything like that, so getting in from the boots up into your feet would have been quite simple for a wriggly. It got into my blood stream and I got hookworm, which was pretty nasty.

So how was that?

Cured? It was known as the 'bomb' but I learnt in later life it was a dry cleaning fluid.

38:30 I think it was called something trichloride, sodium trichloride, something like that, but that's what they

gave you to kill the worm, and you weren't allowed to eat any fatty foods. They'd just give you a mug of beef tea, morning, noon and night and some dry bread. That was all you were allowed to eat until they got the parasite out of your system. I can't remember

39:00 how long it took, probably a week, and I was warned not to have any fatty foods, don't any butter and things like that. A couple of months later on my way home from the war, I was on a compassionate discharge, called into camp, flown most of the way home. Flown from Wewak to Madang, sat up there for a while, down to Lae,

39:30 from Lae to Port Moresby, then finally to Cairns on a flying boat, came down on a Short Sunderland flying boat, about 30 of us on it. In a camp at Redlynch in Cairns and one of the cooks was a fella I knew, like out of our unit and he said, "Don't eat your meal with any of that lot. I'll cook you up a decent breakfast after." So I went around to him about nine o'clock when everyone

40:00 else had finished and he cooked me up sausages, bacon, eggs, toast, lashings of butter, I got into that and boy, was I ill. I remembered then, "No fatty food." They wanted to put me into hospital there but I said, "No, I've got to get home."

Tape 8

00:31 **Now is there, before we move on Keith, is there anything more about the fighting at Wewak or Dove Bay, that we have perhaps missed out on?**

I don't think so. I think it's pretty well covered. We had patrolling out of Karawop. We had casualties there. A fella by the name of Gordon Martin, a very fine officer with A Troop, he was killed. He had been on Timor with the 2/4th

01:00 Independent Company and he got killed in an ambush, and Vic, not Vic, the two Manly brothers from Toowoomba. One of the brothers, I know the other brother, Vic, he's alive but the other one died, he was killed in an ambush. There was a few of them killed there and towards the end of the war we were getting a number of reinforcements

01:30 but I don't think they were well trained. We were losing a lot of those fellas. One I can recall very well his name was Jeffers, John Jeffers. His father was a wing commander in the air force and he was only about 17, I suppose, but he'd been poorly trained and he wanted to be a forward scout and I said, "No, you don't become a forward scout, keep well to the rear." Anyway we had

02:00 a new officer who obviously knew as much about fighting as Jeffers did and he allowed him to be forward scout and he got killed. Should never have been, should never have happened, but things like this do occur through inexperience in all directions.

And you were still manning the Bren gun?

Still a Bren gunner, yeah.

02:30 **I know you've told us but in terms of the forward scout and the support group there, where were you placed in the…?**

Support group.

Yeah.

That's only on a patrol. When you're in a fixed position, the Bren gun is set up in the best position to get the greatest effective fire, cause it is a good weapon and can put up a rapid rate of fire.

03:00 **And the terrain at Karawop, is that correct?**

Karawop.

Karawop, was it still jungle terrain?

Oh yes, it was where the mountains came right down to the sea. There was no marshland in between. There was plenty of ridges and mountains directly behind Karawop.

And how long would a patrol generally last? I mean would you be out the whole day or a half-day or something like that?

03:30 Oh you could go out for the whole day. You might be out for two or three days. If you were out for two or three days you'd take rations.

And I take it wasn't every patrol that you necessarily saw action? It might have been?

Oh no, there was many a patrol that you didn't sight any of them.

And what was the mood like?

Probably be the majority of them.

And I personally just imagine it doesn't matter whether you've action or not, but after a day or two days it's still that?

04:00 Oh the tension's there, oh yeah. But you mightn't sight enemy for two or three days and then it mightn't be a great fight. It might be just an exchange of shots and then they hop off and or we hop off too, depends on how strong they are.

So you'd be encountering, I mean basically it was a similar patrol, the Japanese version

04:30 **of what you were doing, or rather they themselves were patrolling?**

I'd say so. Hopefully out to find out what we were up to because they were after all, they had as much to lose as we did. That was their life and quite a few of them came into us after the war to surrender at Cape Wom. The surrender ceremony took place and General Adachi [Lieutenant-General Futazo Adachi, Commander Japanese 18th Army] and about six or seven other generals came in with him and they,

05:00 all the troops that came in and surrendered with him were very fine, very good condition. Better degree of fitness than us, all new uniforms. Goodness knows where they came from and they were dressed the part. He didn't want to surrender. He thought he was going to negotiate a peace treaty. I think 'Red Robbie' [Lieutenant-General Sir Horace Robertson, Commander 6th Division, then First Australian Army] who was the general at the time, he became a general, took

05:30 over from [Major-General] Jack Stephens. Stephens had us for most of the campaign. He was the division general but he was being relieved, I suppose to give him a break and General Robertson came in, Horace Robertson. And he made no bones about the fact that there was no negotiated surrender,

06:00 it was straight out unconditional.

How did you manage to end up there at the surrender at Cape Wom?

Oh by this stage I'd transferred into the 6th Division Signals because I was in for a compassionate discharge and my father wrote to me and said, "You won't get a compassionate discharge, can't

06:30 be arranged while you're in a combat unit, you've got to get out." So I went to, when I was in the hospital at Cape Wom, I went and spoke to the 6th Division Signals adjutant. Their camp was right where the hospital was located and he agreed that he'd like to have me as a dispatch rider, back on the motorbikes, so for about the last three weeks I was in the army,

07:00 I was back despatch riding. I met some pretty interesting people in 6th Div Sigs [6th Division Signals] there.

Can you tell us a bit about those weeks there?

Oh yes, I went in on a Dakota aircraft to Maprik, a place that we'd been trying to take six months earlier, saw Maprik from the air, landed there and delivered the despatches to the brigade headquarters. Then another time I went

07:30 up to where the 16th Brigade were, not just far from our position at Wewak actually, where we were in Dove Bay.

So you flew back in?

Oh yeah, I flew up to Maprik, was all very interesting, particularly to fly over the country that we'd been walking over. That was of particular interest. I didn't realise the ridges were so

08:00 sharp and the jungle was so deep until I was flying, but it was amazing what you could see from the air. On another occasion, I had to go to the 16th Brigade Headquarters. I rode my bike from Cape Wom down to Wewak and up a big mountain, a huge mountain and when the road petered out I left the bike at an engineer depot and met another fellow I knew from Balmain who was there.

08:30 And he was with the engineers and then I went up to, by foot to the 16th Brigade Headquarters. About two or three days later, the fighting stopped. So that was interesting. The fella I met there was a fella by the name of Paddy Garvin, and Paddy had been at Tobruk with the 2/13 Battalion and

09:00 another fella there, John Dunn, had served on the Kokoda with the 39th Battalion and there was quite a few interesting blokes in 6th Div Sigs, a good lot of fellas.

So was there a sense, even before the surrender before, I mean do you remember where you were when the A-bombs [Atomic bombs, on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan] were dropped, for example?

Oh I was with 6th Div Sigs, yeah. I'd been there a couple of weeks, I suppose. It was within

09:30 two, three weeks I was home, from that time.

So what was everyone thinking when the bombs were dropped? Was that a sense that it was the end; that was it?

Thank God it's over because we were told when the Japanese were finished in the Aitape/Wewak area, we were going over to

10:00 New Britain and as I don't think I've mentioned it but when the Japanese started coming in for surrendering, there were a lot more Japanese than what there were us. And I don't think, right throughout the 6th Division, I doubt whether they would have had with the fighting troops had anymore that five or six thousand fit men. But there was probably 25,000 fit Japanese, so we had the task in front of us.

10:30 Would have been a really tough go at the end. They were massing on this mountain. They were coming back onto this mountain to put on a last stand. I forget what it was called, Chikerangu or some name like that. I'd have to look at that map. I'd pick it out on that map. Do you want to cut if off for a moment?

Okay.(Tape stops) If you're not sure of the name.

Is that the highest feature there?

It doesn't say.

I think it was.

So it was Mount…what did you call it?

11:00 Chikerangu, I think.

Chikerangu, yes, Mount Chikerangu, so they were…?

They were going to mass there and put on a last stand, which would have been a bit of a massacre at both ends I think.

And by that stage Aitape and that area were cleared of the enemy?

Oh yes, there was no Japanese around there. But the

11:30 end in sight would have been a bloody sight I reckon. Would have been a beauty, so we were all saved from that. I don't mind the atom bomb being dropped. Do you want that to go on record? I'm on record? Well I'm very happy the atomic bomb was dropped because not only of the allied soldiers who lost millions but also for the

12:00 millions of Japanese that would have been killed on their homeland. The Japanese wouldn't have given up without a hard fight and many millions would have been killed. As it was with the atom bomb there was probably, I forget the figures but would have been under 100,000 I guess, so it was a good thing.

So based on what you knew of the terrain, of the enemy and of the allied capabilities, how long do you think it would have gone for if the A-bomb…?

12:30 **hadn't been dropped?**

Oh probably another month, because they were already retreating back into that area. They were coming from the Torricelli Mountains. The 17th Brigade were pushing them that way, the 16th Brigade were pushing them another way and the 19th Brigade, the three brigades were virtually all involved in it and they were pushing them into a knot but we wouldn't have had the men to

13:00 see it through. There's no doubt about that. There would have been terrific casualties.

I mean there were those that said they should have been starved out of existence?

They wouldn't have starved out because they could have colonised, which they were doing anyhow. That's why they were so fit around the Wewak area. When they sent that force from Maprik to have a go at us at Milak, they were very fit men. They weren't starved by any means.

13:30 They were well equipped and they were fit and looked as though they were better shape than we were.

So what's your take on that notion of this being a mopping up exercise?

I laugh at that. Cause we didn't know who was mopping up whom in the end. I don't know which side had the mop.

14:00 It was funny. There was a fella in hospital, I'd heard of this. I didn't experience this myself but I'd heard of it and he had, he'd been burnt with a phosphorous bomb on the hands and he was all bandaged up when the acting Minister for War visited the area. I think his name was Chambers or Chamberlain or Chambers and he visited and he asked this bloke, he said, "What happened to your hands, son?"

14:30 And he said, "That bloody mop you gave me got too hot to handle and burnt my hands." I believe it's true he said it.

So you said you were in Cape Wom when the surrender took place, can you tell us a bit about that experience?

Yes, I didn't realise that it was such an important occasion, otherwise I would have paid more attention to it. I just more or less out of curiosity went over and had a look

15:00 and I saw the, at the end of the Cape Wom strip, it was only a little strip that could take an Auster spotting aircraft, although Billy Brown, the cricketer, landed there at one time on a DC3, that was another story. It was a small strip but it was fairly well prepared and coronus [crushed coral] material underneath it. Could have taken a fair

15:30 size aircraft. I'm sure a fighter aircraft could have landed on it but they assembled the Japanese at the bottom and they made them march the length of the Wom strip and they had Australian soldiers on one side formed up, sprucely turned out. On the other side just people like myself who were interested bystanders and there was quite a bit of booing went on as they came up.

16:00 I don't think the generals would have appreciated it but it was very impressive. If I had a camera, I would have made a camera shoot of it, but it's at RSL [Returned and Services League] House and Anzac House and Duckmore House there's photos of that surrender and they've got it pretty well documented, more so than anywhere else around.

So what else did that event

16:30 **entail in terms of the ritual of it that you recall?**

There was the handing in of the swords and then they marched them over to divisional headquarters and I think they were more or less put in a compound there. They had a compound to put them in. I didn't go along but they would have had to put them under some security. But I understand

17:00 that the general [Adachi] had no intention of surrendering, he just came in to talk peace, get the terms he could, but the historians would know all about that, whether that's right or not.

So what was next for you?

The next thing for me? To get home. I've already mentioned a bit about that. But I came back with nothing, as the kit bag I'd packed before and put it into the kit store in Ipswich had gone adrift.

17:30 Somebody had stolen it no doubt, so I had what I came in with, though 6th Div Sigs when I was there, I got rigged out in decent slacks and shirts and underpants, which I hadn't worn all the time and socks which I hadn't worn, new boots and I was pretty well kitted out, so when I came home I looked presentable.

18:00 I forgot when I got home. Early October, yes it would be the first week of October and I remember being on the Manly boat [ferry]. My parents were living down at the holiday place at Harbord and I got on the Manly boat and all the American ships in Sydney Harbour were playing music, the 'Ink Spots' [American vocal group] were singing over their amplifier systems and I thought,

18:30 "Oh, this peace is not bad." See ships in Sydney Harbour and they were not taking evasive action and I was pleased to get home. My parents didn't have a telephone, so I couldn't ring them and say I was coming but they knew to expect me, so they didn't know when. I was pretty pleased to get home. I was discharged

19:00 a week later. My mother had been very ill. That's why I got that compassionate discharge and I suppose within three or four days I was discharged. They gave you coupons to go and buy, oh no, they gave you actually a free docket to get a suit and shoes.

19:30 Actually they didn't just turn you out on the street, the government were pretty good and I felt awkward wearing a suit and I bought, on top of that I got ration tickets, and bought a sports jacket which was a mustard colour and a pair of brown slacks and fell in for a lot of laughter at my choice of clothes. In these days, I'd be pretty well

20:00 dressed.

And how did you find your mother when you reunited?

She was just recovering from a hysterectomy and they found it was cancerous and I didn't think she'd be with us long but she went on to live until she was 72, so they must have got it all when they took it out.

20:30 And I was home about a couple of months when Marge came to our place for a holiday. Her cousin and my cousin are one and the same person. We had a cousin in common although I'd never met Marge and she'd never met me although she knew my brothers and she came to Sydney for a holiday and we hit it on pretty well and

21:00 we were married in the July after the war.

'46.

So we've been happily married since, minimum of argument. I'm honest when I say that, very little argument. She's got to put up a lot with me because I did a lot of boozing. As I say, the

21:30 doctor I went to in Manly to tell him I was having trouble with nightmares and he gave me a great counselling lesson by saying, "You've got to take hold of yourself, young fellow, or you'll end up at Callan Park [insane asylum in Sydney]." That was one of the two mental hospitals in Sydney. I had a choice apparently, or no choice. So I gave

22:00 him away and didn't bother going back to him. I've lived with it since. As you know, I haven't spoken about this very much at all.

So upon returning, it wasn't something that was talked about at all?

No, I attacked my mother one night. She heard me having a nightmare and came in to try and quieten me down and I

22:30 took to her. I thought she was a Japanese and my father said to her, "Leave him alone. It's better to leave him to sweat it out. Don't try and steady him up because he won't know where you are and who you are." And I didn't either, I had no idea. So it happened to Marge on a couple of occasions too.

23:00 **Was that particularly bad after you got back?**

I think they've all had it bad. The more you talk to people about it now, mention it to them, most of them have had no, particularly my mates, they've had no different experience to what I've had. It's pretty hard, it's hard to live with.

Sounds like you've done very well to get a good woman like Marge?

Oh I got one out of the box.

23:30 A really good wife. I've never been violent towards her, oh accidentally when I took her for something else. We've been pretty settled, happy. I didn't have any particular girlfriend until I met her and we clicked together which was great.

What was it do you think that

24:00 **made you click?**

Don't know what it was but I suppose a bit of chemistry because we were engaged within three months of meeting and married three months later, so that's worked out.

And what did you do work-wise?

I went back to Hardie Trading Company.

24:30 They'd formed an export division and I was the shipping clerk. There was my knowledge of ships coming to the fore. I spent a lot of time at the wharfs getting bills of loading signed and the normal procedure that goes on with shipping. That was the worst job they could have given me because I passed too many pubs on the way to the wharves and back again, cost me a lot of money to work. I decided that I was getting

25:00 nowhere in Sydney and I had too many mates there and Marge wanted me to give it a try elsewhere so we came to Melbourne and I had a couple of jobs. It was easy to get work, a couple of jobs in Melbourne before I went to work for Jakes Brothers Limited, or Jakes

25:30 Brothers in those days, Proprietary Limited. They were a medium-sized, heavy engineering works. They had been going, until they folded just recently, for 150 years. They were well established in the mining and quarrying industry. I had a great opportunity there of getting somewhere and I eventually did. I became a divisional manager and made an associate director with the company when I was about 32 I think

26:00 and got to know the industry and the industry people knew me and I enjoyed a happy relationship within that industry and I loved it. After I retired from there, I was assisting the TAFE [Institute of Tertiary And Further Education] in organising a correspondence course for quarry superintendents,

26:30 supervisors and I wrote quite an amount of material for them. I have a flair for writing, even though my basic education didn't go past the intermediate stage. I've learnt as I've gone along. What is it? The college of hard knocks and commonsense. I've had the ability to pick up things pretty quickly, particularly mechanical wise and engineering. I got involved in the establishment of branch operations

27:00 around Australia and outside of Australia, Singapore, not Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong. I used to, for 20 years, I travelled South East Asia and helping to develop an export market. I was only one of a number, three or four that was involved. I played I think a rather pivotal role.

27:30 **You said you already had a great respect for the Chinese people?**

Yes, I got on well with Chinese people, always have done and I think my…

That would have helped in business?

stature helps me a lot. They don't like being looked down upon and of course I had to look up to them, so I reckon being short has its advantages. But I got on well, I'd say I got on well with everyone I had business dealings with,

28:00 and there are a number still in contact with me and I'm happy about that. I send them their Chinese New Year cards every year and they send me Christmas cards and occasionally if any of them are in Australia they contact me and I go and see them. I only saw one just before Christmas last year. He's an old friend of mine from Singapore and it was great to see him again. So I've maintained those contacts and industry contacts.

28:30 After I'd retired from Jakes and helped with the writing of the, or I did a lot of writing for the TAFE off-campus course they were organising through Box Hill Tech [Box Hill Technical Institute], I went to work for a friend of mine who was starting up an engineering business. He started Select Engineering and his name was Bill White and I went to work for Bill. Helped him get established

29:00 and he couldn't pay me until he started to make some profits and after a few years the business got off the ground and some of my business contacts were helpful to him. He got large contracts at Mt Isa Mines and round the different mines where I was known, and we developed a great business connection for him, like helped him. I'm not saying I did it

29:30 all because Bill's a very capable man and so I helped him get on his feet and I worked until I was 73. When I lost the sight of my eye, I found I couldn't drive into the sun. The works was over at Bayswater, so I had to drive into the sun both ways, going to Bayswater and coming home and I found it was too much. Bill wanted his son

30:00 to provide the transport daily but I thought, "No, it's tieing James down to much," and I wouldn't be in that, so I retired. I was sorry to retire because I loved doing my work and I think even now at 80 years of age, if I hadn't of had the eye trouble I'd still be working.

Do you think the eye problem was related to the war experience?

Yes, it's been accepted by DVA [Department of Veterans' Affairs], through trauma, the bleeding behind it

30:30 built up a lot of pressure. I got hypertension as well and how I'm deaf, I got that from being a machine gunner. Which is rather interesting because how many years ago I applied for a disability pension, not DVA in those days, it was Repatriation at St Kilda Road. They had a young doctor and I suppose he'd been out of university for five minutes

31:00 and he said to me, "On what grounds are you claiming your deafness?" And I said, "Through being a machine gunner" and he said, "What makes you think that would send you deaf?" I said, "Do you know what I'm speaking about?" And he said, "Carry on," and I said, "Do you know what a machine gun looks like?" And he looked at me as if to say, "Keep on going," and I said, "Have you ever heard one fire? Have you ever fired one?"

31:30 By this time I'm getting all heated up and I've got a short fuse on occasions and I let it fly this time and I said to him, "When you've done all that and you tell me I haven't been deaf because of being a machine gunner, I'll believe you, but in the meantime," I said, "why don't you get out and get a bit of life." Several years after tha,t I got a copy of my Freedom of Information and I looked up to see what this character

32:00 had written and he'd written down, "This man is very aggressive." I thought, "If only he'd known me when I was young, he'd have known how aggressive I was." I was very much a subdued character then, by the time he got me.

How do you think your experiences in the war and as a commando and your training and your experiences there

32:30 **equipped you for your working life and life after the war?**

Oh it's done a lot towards it. The best education I could ever have had. I learnt how to get on with people. You can't live in a tent with men or live in a hole with men and not get on with them. You've got to give as much as you take, you've got to be able to adapt yourself, which I think I've been able to achieve. A lot of it's due to my

33:00 army training. I stayed, when the citizen army [Citizen Military Forces (CMF)] was reformed in 1948, I joined the army again as a citizen soldier in 1948, with the 4/19th Prince of Wales Light Horse. I was appointed the original sergeant-major at the headquarters squadron at Coburg and about 18 [months] later I was commissioned as a lieutenant.

33:30 And when we came out here to live, I didn't own a motor car and I couldn't get to Coburg easily, as you can imagine, from out Waverley with the little feeder service trains, so I just resigned and so I had four happy years with the 4/19th Prince of Wales, great. Again I met quite a number of people that I got on

well with and some I still see.

What sort of commitment was that

34:00 **with Coburg?**

Oh you went to a drill one night a week and most weekends and then you did three weeks' camp a year. I'd take my holidays from work and go to the camp. I did a couple of training courses.

And how close are you now and have you been with your old mates from either squadron or from the war?

With the regiment I've been

34:30 a committeeman ever since I've lived in Victoria. I've been President of the Regiment Association and currently I'm secretary/treasurer of the Regiment Association. In the Commando Association, I've been a committeeman there and squadron representative for maybe 35 years, could be longer, could be less.

35:00 I'm editor of their magazine The Double Norman and have been for just on 10 years. Both associations I've been made an honorary member. I devote a lot of time to that and Marge does too. She does a lot of work on the computer and her efforts are appreciated by both organisations.

Can I ask what was the

35:30 **most important thing that you took from your wartime experience?**

I'd say the ability to get on with people. The study of human relations, can you put it that way? And I think that's big plus and I made a lot of friends, many, many friends and a number are dead now,

36:00 of course. And even last month I lost one of my good friends from the troop. I was in his section, Number Four Section, he was the section corporal and he died just a few weeks ago. There's not many of us left now from the 2/10th Squadron. Probably around Australia there might be 20,

36:30 so we're getting thin on the line.

When you look at the world today, we don't want to get too deep and meaningful, do you feel that all those sacrifices have been worth it, we've come a way?

I think so, we've made Australia a country to be noted but also attracted a lot of people that want to come and live here. Without immigration I don't

37:00 believe we'd last. So being a migrant myself from New Zealand, I can't complain whether they're legal or illegal. Oh that's a funny thing that happened, it was something to do with when I was away. They brought in Australian nationality and not knowing about it, I didn't apply for it and

37:30 of course when I wanted to get a passport I found out I was an alien in this country that I'd been brought up in. That led to a bit of confusion with the Immigration Department. They wanted me in and it cost me 30 dollars to become a naturalised Australian. I got a certificate.

No barbed-wire fence for you?

No barbed-wire fence.

Now we've only got like a minute, two minutes left, is there anything that you'd just like to say in conclusion for the record,

38:00 **for posterity?**

Oh I think it's a good thing that you're doing, getting it on record that. My words I don't consider will be of great interest to many people but it's just another view. Everyone you interview you probably find they've got a different story to tell, some might be entirely different to mine but that's the way you see it and that's the way you speak it.

38:30 **Anything else? I think we're done. Thanks Keith.**